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Consensus-Based Decision-Making Processes

A consensus based decision-making process is an effort in which affected parties (stakeholders) seek to reach agreement on a course of action to address an issue or set of related issues. In a consensus process, the stakeholders work together to find a mutually acceptable solution.

Each consensus process is unique because the parties design their agreement to fit their circumstances. However, successful consensus processes follow several guiding principles:

- Consensus Decision-making - Participants make decisions by agreement rather than by majority vote.
- Inclusiveness - To the extent possible, all necessary interests are represented or, at a minimum, approve of the decision.
- Accountability - Participants usually represent stakeholder groups or interests. They are accountable both to their constituents and to the process.
- Facilitation - An impartial facilitator accountable to all participants manages the process, ensures the ground rules are followed, and helps to maintain a productive climate for communication and problem solving.
- Flexibility - Participants design a process and address the issues in a manner they determine most suitable to the situation.
- Shared Control/Ground Rules - Participants share with the facilitator responsibility for setting and maintaining the ground rules for a process and for creating outcomes.
- Commitment to Implementation - All stakeholders commit to carrying out their agreement.

Elements of a Consensus Based Decision:

- All parties agree with the proposed decision and are willing to carry it out;
- No one will block or obstruct the decision or its implementation; and
- Everyone will support the decision and implement it.

Levels of Consensus:

- I can say an unqualified "yes"!
- I can accept the decision.
- I can live with the decision.
- I do not fully agree with the decision, however, I will not block it and will support it.

Sample Ground Rules

1. **It's Your Show:** We understand that this is our process. The facilitators are resources to take us where we agree to go. We determine the agenda, ground rules, issues and process. We agree to attend and fully participate in all meetings.
2. **Everyone is Equal:** We agree that all participants in the process are equal.
3. **No Relevant Topic is Excluded:** We agree that no relevant topics are excluded from consideration unless we agree they are. This is our opportunity to bring up and thoroughly discuss issues that concern us.
4. **No Discussion is Ended:** We agree that no discussion is ended, including process discussion, ground rules and rule of decision. Agreements reached at prior meetings, unless implemented, are always open for further consideration.
5. **Respect Opinions:** We agree to respect each other's opinions. We will use gentle candor in comments to each other and will not interrupt.
6. **Respect the Time:** We all understand the time constraints we face and agree to respect the time. No one will dominate the discussions, and all participants will have an opportunity to express their opinions.
7. **Silence Is Agreement:** We agree that silence on decisions is agreement. The facilitators and other participants cannot read our minds. If it appears that the group is reaching a consensus on an issue, if no one voices disagreement, it is assumed that all are in agreement.
8. **Keep the Facilitator Accurate:** We agree to make certain that the facilitators capture what we meant to say. We will keep the facilitators accurate.
9. **Non-attribution:** We agree that we will not attribute ideas or comments made by participants to others outside of this process.
10. **Rule of Decision:** We agree that the rule of decision is Consensus, as described above. We agree to strive for consensus. If agreement by all participants on an issue

is not possible, we will seek to develop a clear and balanced statement of the areas of disagreement. Neutrality by any participant does not constitute a lack of consensus.

11. **Media:** We agree that all of our meetings are open to the media and to the public unless we close all or a portion of them by consensus.
12. **Substitutes/Proxies:** We agree that we will not send substitutes or proxies. We may send observers to meetings, but they will not have participant status.
13. **Have Fun:** We agree to do our best to enjoy the process and to help other participants do so as well.

Consensus Decision Making

In simple terms, consensus refers to agreement on some decision by all members of a group, rather than a majority or a select group of representatives. The consensus process is what a group goes through to reach this agreement. The assumptions, methods, and results are very different from traditional parliamentary procedure or majority voting methods.

In the traditional political/legal processes, one side wins and one side loses. Some issues come back time and again, or an issue may be so contentious that it is simply never resolved. By contrast, a public policy consensus dialogue is framed and agreements developed in a mutually beneficial way ensuring that no issue is “off limits” and that all essential stakeholders are on board.

Acting according to consensus guidelines enables a group to take advantage of all group members' ideas. By combining their thoughts, people can often create a higher-quality decision than a vote decision or a decision by a single individual. Further, consensus decisions can be better than vote decisions because voting can actively undermine the decision. People are more likely to implement decisions they accept, and consensus makes acceptance more likely.

What the consensus process requires

Consensus demands a high level of trust among the members of the group. People need to believe that each member is a fair and reasonable person of integrity who has the organization's best interests at heart. There are no perfect groups or perfect individuals, but for consensus to work the members must believe that everyone is honestly doing their best.

Another important element of the consensus process is a good facilitator. This person is responsible for ensuring that everyone is heard, that all ideas are incorporated if they

seem to be part of the truth, and that the final decision is agreed upon by all assembled. The facilitator is the servant of the group, not its leader. It is his/her job to draw out and focus the best thinking of the group, not to use his/her position to impose or elevate his/her own.

It's important that the facilitator never show signs of impatience or disfavor towards an idea or a member. Total objectivity may be an unattainable ideal, but the facilitator should strive to remain as neutral as possible in the discussion. If he/she can't manage this, then someone else should be facilitating. For this reason, many groups rotate the facilitator role on some kind of regular schedule, or choose a facilitator for each discussion depending on who is willing to forgo taking a more active part.

A good facilitator needs to be patient, intuitive, articulate, able to think on his/her feet, and have a sense of humor. He/she should always be on the lookout for things that are missing--a person who wants to speak but has been too shy, an idea that was badly articulated or dismissed too quickly but has potential, or anything happening on the nonverbal level that might be significant. The facilitator should periodically state and restate the ideas on the table, the elements that have been agreed on, and the questions still being decided. This allows everyone to see that progress is being made, and to focus on the work left to be done.

Key guidelines for consensus decision-making

Consensus building processes require active listening, open communications and patience. Participants are usually asked to agree to operate by consensus, use gentle candor, put interests and concerns on the table, attend meetings faithfully, remain flexible and demonstrate willingness to listen to proposals of other participants. It is important that no participants immediately reject a proposal or idea but ask instead, "Can it be adapted to meet my needs as well?" In short participants are asked to:

- Come to the discussion with an open mind. This doesn't mean not thinking about the issue beforehand, but it does mean being willing to consider any other perspectives and ideas that come up in the discussion.
- Listen to other people's ideas and try to understand their reasoning.
- Describe their own reasoning briefly so other people can understand them. Avoid arguing for their own judgments and trying to make other people change their minds to agree with them.
- Avoid changing their mind only to reach agreement and avoid conflict. They should not "go along" with decisions until they have resolved any reservations that they consider important.

- View differences of opinion as helpful rather than harmful.
- Avoid conflict-reducing techniques such as majority vote. Stick with the process and see if they can't reach consensus after all.

Variations on basic consensus

No matter how well the discussion is carried forward, how good the facilitator and how much integrity and trust exist in the group, there sometimes comes a point where all are in agreement but one or two. At this point there are a few possible courses of action. One is to ask if the individuals are willing to be "neutral." They may not agree with the decision, but they also do not feel that it is wrong, so they may be willing to have the decision go forward. Depending on the size and nature of the group, if more than one or two people want to remain neutral on a decision, the group should probably take another look at it.

Another possibility is to lay aside the issue for another time. Although this alternative may create some difficulties, the world will likely continue to turn with or without a decision being made right now. The need to make a decision promptly is often not as important as the need to ultimately come to unity around a decision that has been well-crafted, taking the time it needs to do it right.

A third possibility is that one or two people may simply stop the group from moving forward. At this time there are several key considerations. Most important, the group should see those who are withholding consensus as doing so out of their highest understanding and beliefs. Next, the individual(s) who are preventing the group from making the decision should also examine themselves closely to assure that they are not withholding consensus out of self-interest, bias, vengeance, or any other such feeling. A refusal to enter consensus should be based on a very strong belief that the decision is wrong--and that the dissenter(s) would be doing the group a great disservice by allowing the decision to go forward.

This is always one of those times when feelings can run high, and it's important for the group not to put pressure on those who differ. It's hard enough to feel that you are stopping the group from going forward, without feeling coerced to go against your examined reasons and deeply felt understandings.

Some groups operate under a modified consensus approach called "Consensus-Minus-One." What this means is that it takes more than one dissenting members to block consensus. One voice at odds with the rest is considered a workable way to go forward, but more than one is a sign that the decision should be re-thought. Consensus-Minus-One can be a reassuring arrangement for people who are new to the process of

consensus decision-making, or in groups where members are not well acquainted enough to have the level of trust needed to commit to achieving full consensus. In practice, many groups have found that Consensus-Minus-One serves as a safety valve that rarely gets used. If even one member has strong reservations about a decision, it's often enough to keep the group searching for a better answer.

What Facilitators Do for a Process

1. They emit a presence.
2. They create a safe, productive environment.
3. They respect all participants and encourage mutual respect.
4. They educate the participants about best practice policies and procedures.
5. They identify and clarify the interests and needs of the parties.
6. They model legitimate conversation/discussion patterns.
7. They enhance communications.
8. They perform face-saver roles, protecting each participant.
9. They assist in collaborative problem solving.
10. They reflect and “reality-test” what is proposed.
11. They assist in developing written statements/agreements.
12. They assist in implementation of agreements.

What Facilitators Do Not Do for a Process

1. They do not assume.
2. They do not violate confidential communications.
3. They do not dictate agreements.
4. They do not impose their own values.
5. They do not function as psychologists.

6. They do not make promises they cannot keep.
7. They do not enforce agreements.
8. They do not lose self-control.