

THE CONSENSUS PROCESS OR “CREATIVE JOINT PROBLEM SOLVING”

Consensus: Collective opinion or agreement, harmony, cooperation, sympathy and group solidarity.

Advantages of Using a Consensus Process

1. Education and Awareness

A consensus process provides learning opportunities for all involved. Shared perceptions and experiences provide a deeper, richer understanding of the issue being discussed. This increased understanding provides the basis for selecting appropriate solutions.

2. Better Decisions

Decisions using a consensus process reflect the concerns of all involved parties and draw upon the creativity and breadth of ideas in the group.

3. Embracing the Result

Those who have been engaged in creating a solution or making a decision will be more likely to embrace the result and less likely to challenge it. In other words, “buy-in” of parties is enhanced.

4. Faster Implementation

Consensus results in less challenge to the implementation of a solution. When potential adversaries are involved at the beginning of a consensus process, those concerns are considered and integrated into the solution. The more that concerned parties are involved in a decision-making process, the less resistance will be experienced upon implementation.

5. Creation of New Partnerships

New relationships are potentially formed as a result of sharing of common values, interests, and strategies.

Drawbacks: Consensus takes time, patience, and willingness to compromise. Decisions can be halted by one person’s objections.

DESIGNING A CONSENSUS PROCESS

When to Use a Consensus Process:

- ✓ Issues are complex
- ✓ Many parties are involved
- ✓ No one agency or organization has decision making power
- ✓ Issues are negotiable
- ✓ Parties are willing to participate

Goals for a Consensus Process:

- ✓ Develop collaborative vision and goals
- ✓ Make an inclusive collaborative decision
- ✓ Resolve a controversy

Elements of a Consensus Process:

- ✓ Participation is inclusive
- ✓ Participants are jointly responsible for the success of a process, program, or effort
- ✓ People are informed
- ✓ Participants educate each other about the issue(s)
- ✓ People agree on a common definition of the problem
- ✓ Multiple solutions or options are identified
- ✓ Participants are responsible for overseeing implementation of solutions

STEPS IN CREATING A CONSENSUS PROCESS

Step 1: Clarify and frame the issue

- ✓ What is the tangible issue?
- ✓ Where does each party stand on the issue?

Participants in a consensus process must know what they are discussing and deciding. A common understanding of the problem—its location, the extent, and the impacts—is necessary before proceeding. It is helpful to frame the issue in terms of a question to initiate discussion: “What strategies can we employ to prepare children for kindergarten in our community?”

Step 2: Establish agreements

- ✓ How will we decide?
- ✓ Who will make the decision?

Group agreements are essential to any productive group process. Agreements, or ground rules, will be both process-oriented and task-oriented. Examples of process agreements include how group members will behave toward one another. Task-oriented or procedural agreements will include how information will be shared, when a decision will be made, and who will participate in decision-making.

Step 3: Gather information

- ✓ What are the likely outcomes?
- ✓ What are the benefits and drawbacks?

Participants will identify key issues, interests, and relevant data as related to the issue, as well as public input. Task groups can be formed to investigate different aspects of an issue and then report back to the entire group. The goal of the information gathering stage is to gain a collective understanding of an issue and to begin identifying common ground. Try to discover all the possible consequences of a particular decision.

Step 4: Generate options

- ✓ Brainstorm all possible solutions
- ✓ Involve all parties affected by the decision

Participants generate options, or alternate solutions, to a problem or issue. Again, the community (e.g. youth, parents, etc.) may be invited to participate at this stage and task groups may be formed to generate alternate solutions to a particular aspect of an issue. For additional ideas, investigate what has worked in other communities or collaboratives.

Step 5: Reach agreements

- ✓ Evaluate each proposed solution
- ✓ Choose the solution(s) most acceptable to all parties
- ✓ Decide together without voting

As possible solutions are presented, it may be helpful to use criteria to evaluate those solutions. Some criteria may be: feasibility, resources available or resource requirements, community support, and/or impact on a community. Your collaborative will determine the criteria by which to evaluate options. Participants reach agreement by combining, synthesizing, and compromising. The final solution(s) is one that "everyone can live with." The outcome should feel like a "win-win" situation. This is the time to focus a sense of shared values within the group and on common ground - "interests, not positions."

Step 6: Implementing and monitoring solutions

- ✓ How will the solution be carried out? When?
- ✓ How will we know if it's successful?
- ✓ If the first solution has flaws, revisit the decision

This last step is essential. The group is responsible for an implementation plan including agreements with all involved parties and a plan for monitoring progress and outcomes. Sometimes, the first solution chosen is not always the best.

GUIDELINES FOR CONSENSUS*

Not every decision calls for consensus. Modify the problem-solving/decision-making model to fit your own group, its needs, and the type or importance of the decision to be made.

Think about using committees to gather and present relevant information or for a particular decision. It saves time.

Attempt to satisfy objections. Since there is a great deal of power invested in every member, the power to block consensus must be used sparingly and in a responsible manner –when there is a serious, principled objection.

Plan ahead for enough time to develop consensus on vital decisions.

Be aware of members who have difficulty expressing their ideas and have facilitators help out.

Always look for the common ground where members can begin to agree on something and work from there.

Remember, a meeting is not a competitive event where someone has to win and someone has to lose.

Avoid arguing for your point of view. Present your views clearly and logically and then listen to what others have to say.

Don't resort to conflict reducers, such as bargaining, majority votes, or flipping a coin. Work it out.

Overcome fear of conflict. It's natural for people to disagree and have differing points of view. The more information and input, the better the decision.

Beware of "Group Think" and the pressure to conform. Don't change your mind simply to avoid conflict. Be aware of the implications of a decision and watch out for important decisions that come too easily.

Seemingly irreconcilable differences can be worked out if people talk freely and honestly and try to listen and understand all sides, including your own.

* Adapted from Working Together: A Manual for Helping Groups Work More Effectively. Biagi, Bob. Citizen Involvement Training Project. University of Massachusetts. Amherst, MA. 1978.