

Consensus Decision-Making - Overview & Process

Community Support Network of Nevada County

OVERVIEW

This document includes content from handouts distributed at the January and March 2010 meetings, and additional information from CSNNC group discussions, ad hoc committee on consensus meetings, and other conversations. This document can serve as a user's guide and reference. It aims to provide a complete enough overview of consensus that anyone who comes to a CSNNC meeting for the first time can read it and have a working understanding of how to participate in the process. Because some content first presented in the handouts has been changed to better serve this group, this document should serve as the primary reference.

In January 2010, CSNNC decided to use consensus as its decision-making protocol.

In March 2010, two things were agreed to specifically in regard to **decision-making** - that is, when there is a call for consensus after ample opportunity for thorough discussion.

First, it was agreed that anyone who blocks helps to create an alternative.

Second, it was agreed that the group will hold to the idea that five or six blocks should be a lifetime quota.

In addition, an ad hoc committee was formed to explore various options for how CSNNC might use the consensus decision-making process. The results of those meetings are incorporated into this document.

In May 2010, three more decisions were made. Those decisions completed the supporting foundation for CSNNC's consensus process. The group now has options for how to introduce, discuss, and re-work proposals, and an established protocol for how decisions are indicated when there is a call for consensus.

First, it was agreed to use thumb signals for **decision-making**.

Up = Agree, Sideways = Neutral or Okay, Down = Block

Second, it was agreed that the facilitator of a **discussion** may choose which, if any, hand signals are used. The facilitator may consult with the steering committee and others before the discussion in order to make this decision.

Third, the group agreed to update the first item in the CSNNC meeting agreements. It formerly read: Make decisions by consensus (we need to define consensus process). The update removed the text that reads: (we need to define consensus process).

Cultural information note - some hand signals, such as "thumbs up," are not socially acceptable gestures in all cultures. People from such cultures usually quickly learn about this, but it's nice for people raised in this culture to know it as well.

General note - there is a specific process called "Formal Consensus" which includes the main aspects of the process CSNNC uses. The difference is that if a group agrees to use Formal Consensus, it agrees to follow the specifically defined structure of that process.

What is consensus decision-making? - Consensus is a cooperative process in which group members develop and agree to support a decision in the best interest of the whole.
~Tree Bressen

Why use it? - High quality decisions, builds connection among members, more effective implementation. ~Tree Bressen. Allows different points of view to be thoughtfully considered, cultivates listening skills, encourages and develops collaborative solution-finding, values the wisdom of group members. ~Susan Sanford

Who has used it? - Haudenosaunee (Six Nations Iroquois Confederacy), Religious Society of Friends (Quakers), cohousing communities, many others

Tools for reaching consensus - Good discussion is one of the keys to successful consensus decision-making. To enhance the quality of discussion, groups may wish to use:

Quaker Dialogue - a process that provides the opportunity for equal participation and attentive listening. There are variations, but common steps are:

1. present the item or question
2. each person has a chance to speak, uninterrupted, usually going around a circle
3. anyone may pass and take a turn later
4. after everyone has spoken, there is open discussion

Talking Stick - essentially like Quaker Dialogue, but a stick or other object is passed around the group. The person holding the stick speaks uninterrupted.

Mind Maps - a non-linear outlining process that can, among other things, reveal important interrelationships and strengths.

Appreciative Inquiry - a stand-alone process that focuses on identifying and building upon strengths. It can help people in organizations to reach consensus or near-consensus on strategic planning and other tasks and goals.

For consideration

- The process needs to work for the group, not vice versa, so keep it open to modification. That includes the things outlined in this overview document! There are a lot of right ways to do this.
- When everyone participates in the process, there is greater investment in creating successful outcomes.
- There is an important difference between someone *feeling* heard and a group process providing the opportunity to *be* heard (personal responsibility vs. group's responsibility).
- If a carefully considered and crafted proposal does not seem ideal to you, ask yourself if you can live with it.
- The consensus decision-making process is well-served by everyone being well-prepared for meetings and by allowing sufficient time for things to unfold and evolve.
- Be willing to experiment and have fun.

Resources

Consensus Decision-Making

- Tree Bressen, Facilitation & Workshops, www.treegroup.info - Topics > Consensus Decision-Making

- Info at Wikipedia page provides a very good overview

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Consensus_decision-making

- Using color cards <http://www.mosaic-commons.org/colorcards> &

<http://www.phch.org/commlife.htm>

Quaker Dialogue - www.lcurve.org/QuakerDialogue.htm, and

http://www.educationworld.com/a_admin/meetingidea/meetingideas036.shtml

Mind Maps - www.buzanworld.com/Mind_Maps.htm and *The Mind Map Book* by Tony & Barry Buzan

Appreciative Inquiry - <http://appreciativeinquiry.case.edu/> and

http://www.innovationpartners.com/Portals/0/IPI_Article_StratPlan_with_AI_CM_JD_BM_TS.pdf

PROCESS

What is the process? - The process can have variations. The Wikipedia entry online captures much of the essence (see link under Resources). There are diagrams of consensus decision-making available online. The process can also be thought of as a spiral: an item or topic flows into the group, it is engaged and explored, its consideration is completed (action/s taken, plan/s made, etc.), and the cycle begins again. There are usually concurrent spirals in motion within a group. Both diagrams, and the spiral analogy, can help identify where the most energy, excitement, commitment, passion, and other resources are.

General tips for using consensus

- Most groups use either hand signals or color cards for individuals to indicate their decisions. CSNNC uses thumb signals.

- "Standing Aside" is an option that can be used to honor a point of strong personal conscience or profound difference of opinion. It allows someone to officially dissent because of personal values while allowing the group to move forward.

- A group may specify that anyone who blocks is responsible for helping to create an alternative. A block is a major decision, and a blocker is someone who is saying, "I oppose the proposal and feel it would be bad for, and do lasting harm to, the group." A group may also hold to the idea that five or six blocks is a lifetime quota. Blocks should encourage the group to keep talking about the issue. CSNNC has agreed that it shall use these two protocols – that is, a blocker helps create an alternative, and five or six blocks shall be generally regarded as a lifetime quota.

- Some groups have decided to use voting as a backup procedure if there is a block that cannot be resolved despite everyone's good faith efforts. Keep in mind that a block can sometimes lead to a different and better outcome if people are willing to work with it. To get started on working with a block, the blocker can be asked to share answers to questions like: What would your ideal solution look and be like? What works for you about what we've talked about so far?

- The group can create an ad hoc committee at any time to address questions that might arise about how the group can best use the process. For example, if the group does come to

feel that it might be well-served by having a voting option to fall back on if consensus cannot be reached, an ad hoc committee could be created to explore and address that.

- When addressing complex and/or emotional issues, items, and situations, it can be helpful to break things into smaller pieces and agree on what you can, then do focused work on the more challenging aspects. This provides the group with tangible progress and successes, and often clears the way to finding agreement on the challenging things more quickly and creatively.
- Take advantage of experience of group members who have used consensus in other settings.
- Using color cards can help both discussions and decision-making flow smoothly. During discussions, a facilitator can call on people in an order that raises and answers questions most efficiently.
- If the group wants to use color cards, the cards will need to be created and stored, and it will take a bit of time for both the group and any facilitators to learn to use them. In addition to a “key card” containing the information in the chart that follows, groups may wish to create one or more sets of cards with the names of the colors on the cards for people who have color-blindness, and one or more key cards in large print.
- The group can empower a committee to act on its behalf. For example, in cases of short timelines with a need for fast decisions. It’s important to clearly define the scope of what the committee is empowered to do.
- The facilitator needs to be clear about when the group is in discussion mode and when it is in decision-making mode. Group members are all process observers too and should ask if clarification is needed. Important example: thumbs down may be common in discussion mode, but uncommon or non-existent in decision mode (because by the time the call for consensus is made, all concerns should have been addressed).

OPTIONS for Consensus Decision-Making Steps, and Color Cards and Hand Signals for Discussion and Consensus Decision-Making

Consensus Decision-Making Steps

Present the item

Discuss the item, ask and answer clarifying questions

Form a proposal - state it in positive language

Call for consensus

If consensus is not reached, identify and address concerns

Modify the proposal

Call for consensus again

Color Cards and Hand Signals for Discussion and Consensus Decision-Making

If your group would be better served by doing any of these things differently, change them! The meaning of any hand signal or color can also be changed temporarily if it helps move things along.

Hand signals	For Discussion	Card Color	For Consensus	Hand signals
Thumb up	I agree with the proposal.	Green	I agree with the proposal (this can range from "I can live with it" to "I'm thrilled!").	Thumb up
Raised hand	I have a question or need clarification. I have a comment or opinion. [After a question is asked, the facilitator can ask if anyone has relevant info in response - see purple.]	Yellow	I have a question that must be answered before I make a decision. [After a question is asked, the facilitator can ask if anyone has relevant info in response - see purple.]	Raised hand
Raised hand	I can provide relevant information.	Purple	I can provide relevant information.	Raised hand
Thumb sideways	I have a process observation (e.g., discussion is off-topic, we need a call for consensus, a concern was raised which has not been addressed, etc.)	Blue	I am neutral, or, I have some slight reservation but find the proposal acceptable.	Thumb sideways
(None specified)	I appreciate your contribution made to the group. Thank you!	Orange	I have a serious reservation but will not block consensus (I am "standing aside").	(None specified)
Thumb down	I'm seriously not on board with this yet. (Person then explains why and usually agrees to be part of creating another alternative.)	Red	Block: I oppose the proposal and feel it would be bad for, and do lasting harm to, the group.	Thumb down