

Consensus Decision Making Process

1. Defining the Consensus Process: “Consensus” means that agreements on minor and major issues are reached through a process of gathering information and viewpoints, having discussions, and synthesizing ideas and/or developing new ones. The goal of consensus process is to reach decisions which everyone can agree on, or at least agree to live with. Ideally, consensus synthesizes the ideas of every member of the group into one decision. Consensus does not necessarily mean total agreement. Rather, it means that a proposal has gone through a process in which everyone has had a chance to express feelings and concerns and in which no decision is finalized until everyone in the group feels comfortable with the decision and is able to implement it without resentment. By knowing the techniques of the consensus making process, you can effectively run chapter/officer meetings and make decisions on issues.

2. Consensus model of decision making for these reasons:

- Consensus creates and strengthens a spirit of trust, cooperation, and respect among the chapter’s members/officers
- By incorporating the clearest thinking of all of the group’s members, consensus increases the likelihood of new, better and more creative decisions.
- Because all have participated in its formation, everyone has a stake in implementing decisions.
- Consensus significantly lessens the possibility that a minority will feel that an unacceptable decision has been imposed on them.
- Consensus safeguards against ego/adversary attitudes, uninformed decision making, “rubber-stamping” of decisions, coercion, self interested positions, mistrust, and halfhearted agreements.

3. Consensus process requires the following:

- Mutual respect.
- Time, patience, and commitment to reaching mutually agreeable outcomes.
- The assumption that each person has ideas to offer and that the sum of the parts are greater than the whole.
- That ideas and solutions be listened to with respect, trust and without coercion.

- That there be sensitivity and openness to new and different ideas.
- That there be an honest effort on the part of all members to accommodate the feelings and ideas of others with one's own.
- A dedication to pursue a mutually agreeable outcome.
- A willingness to "step aside" in decisions with which one may not totally agree, but with which one can live.
- That each person will exercise his/her power to "block" responsibly, i.e. only in cases of profound disagreement with the rest of the group. If one does feel that strongly, it is vital for the good of the individual and the group as a whole to block consensus without feeling guilty, and for the group to respond to this without resentment or anger.
- An understanding that not everyone will have an "equal voice" under consensus. Individuals who have greater involvement in the matter under discussion will have more developed viewpoints and will usually have stronger concerns. At the same time, there must be a strong commitment to avoid patterns of domination and passivity.

4. Guidelines for consensus process:

- An issue is raised:** This may be in the form of a concrete proposal, or as a general discussion. In the latter case, a go-around or brainstorm can be used for everyone to express their point of view, and these ideas can then be synthesized into a proposal. The working proposal should be clearly stated in simple, non-biased language by the facilitator.
- Clarifying questions and amendments:** The facilitator asks for clarifying questions, modifications and friendly amendments. These must be acceptable to the originator of the proposal to be considered as such, or they may be offered as a counter proposal. The proposal(s) are restated and clarifying questions are asked.
- Further facilitated discussion and debate:** At any point in this discussion, process suggestions may be offered on how to proceed. Such process suggestions take precedence over other speakers on the list. Dividing the proposal into several parts for discussion, breaking into smaller groups to allow for further discussion, forming a committee to rework a particularly difficult proposal outside of the meeting, or pointing out a mistake in procedure are all examples of process suggestions that can be helpful in overcoming difficulties. If discussion

on an issue has gone on for a long time and seems to be getting nowhere, call for a break.

- d. **Testing for consensus:** As general agreement emerges, the facilitator restates the original or evolved/amended proposal and tests for consensus. This is done first by asking for reservations and concerns to approving the proposal as stated. Even though a proposal may be acceptable to someone not in total agreement with it, it is important nonetheless for these reservations and concerns to be voiced. If the reservations or concerns rise to the level of objections (meaning that a person can't tolerate proposal as is), the proposal clearly needs more facilitated discussion and debate (back to #3).
- e. **Resolving reservations and concerns—amendments:** If reservations or concerns are expressed, (ie: a person is concerned about proposal, thinks it may not be the best choice, wants small changes), the facilitator asks for amendments (small changes or rewording to meet reservations).
- f. **Testing again for consensus:** Facilitator calls again for consensus (asks for objections or concerns to new, evolved proposal). If all agree, consensus is achieved. If all are in agreement except one or two people, there are three options:
 - i. **Individual(s) can “stand aside”:** If no successful accommodation is made to a person's objections after a reasonable group effort, it is in the individual's obligation to examine whether s/he feels strongly enough to maintain the objection. If not, s/he consents to “stand aside.” If the individual(s) is/are willing to stand aside, it means they do not agree with the decision but do not feel strongly enough to “block.” They are willing to have the decision go forward.
 - ii. **The group can set the proposal aside:** If more than two or three people start to stand aside, then the facilitator should question whether the best decision has been reached yet. Perhaps the proposed decision should be set aside for another time or considered in a different light.
 - iii. **Individual(s) can “block” the decision:** The majority should consider whether they truly understand the reasons and feelings of those dissenting and have exhausted all reasonable compromise. Individuals who are holding the group from making a decision should also examine themselves closely to assure that they are not withholding consensus out of self-interest, bias, stubbornness, vengeance, etc. That said, a person does have

the option of “blocking” the decision. A block should be used cautiously and in a principled way, reflecting deeply felt convictions about the issue in question. A block is not just a “no” vote, or an expression of disfavor. A block says, “I believe what the group wants to do is wrong. I cannot allow the group to do it and I am willing to impose this view on other group members because I feel it so deeply.”

g. **No decision is a decision:** If someone blocks a decision, the group has to start again. To not be able to make a decision *is a decision*. At this point, it is almost always best to table the item in question and to return to it another day, after those involved can reflect, and possibly talk about it outside the meeting.

h **Consensus achieved:** If no one blocks a proposal, and it has been fully discussed, the group can consense to the proposal. When consensus is reached, decide how decision will be implemented.

5. Roles and responsibilities at consensus based meetings:

a. **Facilitator:** helps move the meeting along. Takes suggestions for the agenda and arranges them in order of priority. Makes sure all other meeting roles are filled. Calls on people to speak in turn—keeps a written list if many are in line to speak. Helps insure that everyone has a chance to speak, and that no one dominates the discussion. Helps group resolve conflict and make decisions by summarizing, repeating, or re-phrasing proposals as necessary. Should remain neutral on topics being discussed; when an issue arises about which the facilitator feels strongly, and s/he wants to actively participate, someone else should take over the facilitation on that item.

b. **Timekeeper:** warns the group near the end of the time period allotted for an agenda item. May be filled by the facilitator.

c. **Notetaker:** records minutes, especially all proposals, amendments and decisions the group makes. Decisions and who is to implement them should be noted as precisely as possible.

d. **Process-watcher:** pays attention to group process, especially unexpressed feelings and tensions; reminds the group to relax and take breaks as needed. Optional/as needed.