

A BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF CONSENSUS DECISION-MAKING

Consensus is a process for making group decisions without voting. Agreement is reached through a process of gathering information and viewpoints, discussion and persuasion. The Goal of the consensus process is to reach a decision with which everyone can agree. Consensus at its best relies upon persuasion rather than pressure for reaching group unity.

Many small groups actually use a kind of consensus process even if they officially take votes. In order to preserve the unity and spirit of the group, they take votes only when they feel sure that the group is nearly in complete agreement, and they take time to reconsider close votes.

Consensus decision-making sometimes requires a great deal of patience. It is necessary to listen carefully to opposing viewpoints to reach the best decision. In spite of this drawback, the consensus method has the following advantages over the voting method:

- It produces more intelligent decisions by incorporating the best thinking of everyone.
- It keeps people from getting into adversarial attitudes where individual egos are tied to a proposal that will win or lose.
- It increases the likelihood of new and better ideas being brought up.
- Everyone has a stake in implementing a decision because all have participated in its formation. Participants have more energy for working on projects with which they are fully in accord.
- It lessens significantly, the possibility that a minority will feel that an unacceptable decision has been imposed upon them.

Consensus does not necessarily mean unanimity. A group can proceed with an action without having total agreement. In the event that an individual or individuals cannot agree with a proposal, the facilitator or mediator may ask if the individual(s) are willing to “stand aside” and allow the group to act, or if they feel so strongly that they are unwilling to have the group act. If the individual(s) agree to stand aside, the points of disagreement can be noted in the minutes of the meeting, and the group is free to act. If the individual(s) are not willing to stand aside, action is blocked unless a compromise or substitute agreement can be found. At this point, the group may agree to postpone a decision until a later time so more information can be gathered, people have a chance to further discuss the issues, tempers can cool and people have the opportunity to reflect on the options before them.