



Decision Making in Small Groups

Transparency in decision making helps everyone know how to take part in the decision making process and how power is distributed in the process. There are basically two ways to make decisions as a group — majority rules or consensus. A group can be creative in modifying or combining them. For example, if a group can't reach consensus in a timely manner, then the group can go to a two-thirds majority vote or the director can have the authority to decide. The important thing is that everyone understands the process and agrees to it.

Majority rule voting, in which a decision is made when over half the group supports the proposal, works well for large groups that are not well-versed in the consensus process (see below). However, majority rule means that one part of the community wins and everyone else loses. Silencing a sector of the population goes against a central goal of community organizing which seeks to empower every member of a community and enliven participation in civic life. If a group needs to use majority rule, then in order to avoid alienating a large group, they might decide a proposal will only succeed with a two-thirds majority.²⁷

The Consensus Process Honors all Voices

An alternative method is consensus. A consensus process aims to bring the group to mutual agreement by addressing all concerns. It does not require unanimity. In some cases consensus can take longer than other processes, but it fosters creativity, cooperation and commitment to final decisions.²⁸

Consensus asks us to step out of our narrow personal agendas and to make decisions that are in *the best interest of the whole group*. This is not to say that personal concerns are left out of the process. Effects on or agendas of individuals impact the whole group and are weighed into consideration during the discussion portion of the process. Someone who has a personal concern with a proposal, but who has had their issues deliberated by the group and thinks they can live with the decision can allow a decision to be made by “standing aside.” A “block” is a means of not allowing a decision to be made. A block is only used when a person has a strong moral disagreement or thinks that the decision will fundamentally damage the group. It is not a step to be taken lightly.



☀ Through the experience of using consensus, a community group has the opportunity to transform how they think about power and the possibility of shared power. This is an example of the sixth *Growing Communities Principle*: Foster environmental, community, and personal health and transformation.

Consensus Decision-Making Process

- **State the issue.** What are we talking about? The facilitator asks the person who brought the issue to the group to frame the issue.
- **Clarify the question.** What needs to be decided? The facilitator or the framer states what needs to be decided.
- **Discussion.** What are all the viewpoints? The facilitator asks each person to speak to the issue.
- **Make a proposal.** The facilitator asks for proposals describing action the group can take that will incorporate all viewpoints.
- **Discussion.** The facilitator asks people to speak to proposals by asking clarifying questions or by expressing support or concerns.
- **Modify the proposal** by friendly amendments or withdraw the proposal and solicit new proposals.
- **Test for consensus.**
- **Call for concerns.** The facilitator restates the proposal and asks if anyone still has concerns. If so, the person with concerns restates them and ask others may speak to those concerns.
- **Call for objections within consensus.** If people still have concerns even after they have been thoroughly discussed then the facilitator asks if those persons with remaining concerns are willing to stand aside. (“I think don’t agree but I can live with it.”)
- **Call for blocks.** If persons with concerns cannot stand aside then the facilitator asks if they are blocking. If blocked, the proposal is dropped or discussed further or sent to committee.
- **Consensus reached.** If there are no blocks, ask everyone to show visual (finger waving) or oral agreement.
- **The decision implemented.** Who does what when?

✳ Consensus works best when everyone in the group understands how the process works. It is a good skill to train. The Meeting Facilitation and Group Decision Making Workshop beginning on page 136 includes a section on teaching facilitation and consensus decision making.

Conflict Resolution

People occasionally get into scuffles. A group can be prepared for difficult situations by discussing how they will handle them before they occur.

If members of a project are having difficulties with each other then some steps that may be helpful to agree on before any difficulties arise are:



1. Speak directly to one another. If a person is having an issue with another person, she/he speaks directly to the other person about the concerns. (This sounds obvious, but we know how much easier it is to talk about someone than it is to talk with someone.) During conversation, participants are asked to speak using “I” statements (I feel hurt and unappreciated when not included in decisions that have to do with my project). Participants are also asked to listen actively by setting aside personal opinions and hearing what another person is feeling. Active listening also asks us not to prepare what we are going to say in response to the other person while they are speaking.

2. Ask for third party support. If a person can’t speak directly to someone alone due to fear or difficulty articulating when they are upset, then they can ask a neutral third person to mediate a meeting. Often the third person need not do anything but be a witness to the event. The act of witnessing can create an atmosphere of safety and honesty that can help people move through issues.

3. Convene a conflict resolution committee hearing, if necessary. If the third party meeting does not help move the issue, the problem can be brought to a conflict resolution committee (a committee chosen by the whole group which can participate without conflicts of interest or bias) which “hears” both sides of the issue and gives recommendations for resolution.

4. Implement a resolution. The people engaged in the conflict can voluntarily implement the solutions offered by the committee. If they refuse, then the whole group minus the complainants can take up the issue and decide to require the implementation of the resolution steps or the ejection of one or all of the parties in conflict.

5. Engage in whole group reflection. If the resolutions succeed then the parties in conflict and perhaps the whole group can reflect on what they can do in the future to avoid such problems.