



STUDENT ENVIRONMENTAL ACTION COALITION

Consensus Decision Making

So, as you may have heard, “you cannot use the master’s tools to destroy the master’s house.” Majority rule decision making has the potential to be oppressive in of itself, since it can let the majority dominate and cause the minority to feel voiceless. So what’s the alternative to the traditional “Robert’s Rules” way of going about group decision making? You guessed it—consensus!

What is this consensus thing anyway?

Consensus is a decision making process in which each member of a group agrees to the decision of the whole group. The idea here is that your group talks about the decision/issue at hand until you have a final decision that incorporates the input of and is acceptable to everyone involved.

Assumptions we make to allow the consensus process to work:

- The way we work for social change is a vital link to the change itself. We’ve got to be practicing the change we want to see in the world (“the process is the product”)—so if we want to see a more just, fair, respectful, non-dominating world, let’s use a process that falls in line with these ideals.
- Each individual is important to the group, and everyone’s input/opinions are worth considering.
- Differences of opinion are normal and healthy, and even vital to the decision-making process. They help us advance and develop more thorough understandings of situations. And, they certainly don’t have to result in a divided group – indeed, they can help us grow.

Why would my group want to use consensus?

- When each individual shares in the decision of the group, then they’ll have a greater commitment to the implementation of the group’s decisions. It’s all about giving folks the opportunity to develop ownership and personal investment in the group.
- Consensus can allow for better decisions to be made because more ideas are generated and discussed, which in turn creates more freedom for creativity.
- Consensus helps to avoid the adversarial confrontations, anger and potential hurt feelings that can be generated in a win/lose – style decision making.
- Consensus increases group strength by decentralizing authority and allowing more people in the group to take on leadership roles. Again, it’s all about increasing personal empowerment!

Conditions you need for consensus to work:

- You’ll need a group that shares values and goals. (This emphasizes how important it is for your group to come up with a mission statement!)
- Members must have a commitment to the group and its processes.
- You’ve got to have equal access to power—none of those tricky hierarchical structures.
- People must be aware of and willing to address issues which can lead to inequalities of power, such racism, sexism, classism, homophobia, transphobia. It is important to recognize the make up and dynamics of the group.
- The group needs to be willing to acknowledge differences of opinion and work through them.
- The toughest condition—having the willingness to let go of the ego-identification of your own proposals and ideas. The gist of this is that once the idea leaves your mouth it no longer belongs to you. This means that you must be willing to see the idea changed or synthesized with other ideas. This does not mean that you have the right to take credit for the idea of someone else, but that as the group synthesizes ideas together, the idea becomes that of the group.

Basically for a group to use consensus effectively demands the responsibility of its members, meaning both commitment to the group and personal commitment. You have to be able to listen to (and make space for others) as well as put your voice out there in a non-dominating way on issues about which you feel strongly.

So when would I want to use consensus?

While effective consensus is empowering, it can take a significant investment of time and energy—often much more so than simple majority rules route. This isn’t necessarily a bad thing, since the time you spend is an invaluable investment into the community of your organization. Groups will be better off if objections and concerns are expressed, respected, and creatively resolved. Traditional processes can end up with hasty decisions in which objections are suppressed, which can damage your group and cause unnecessary pain—and in the end, this can take much more time to repair.

It is important to train your group in consensus, and once you feel confident in your ability to use it effectively, you may decide (consense) to use a different or quicker process (such as majority or 2/3 vote, or empowering a person or subcommittee to make the decision) in decisions that don’t matter that much (such as what kind of pizza to order at a meeting).

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