

# Consensus ~ A Journey and A Destination



## What is Consensus?

Consensus is both a process and a product...

**As a process** (a journey), consensus describes the means by which groups can productively resolve issues, make choices, or develop strategy.

**As a product** (a destination), consensus represents a resolution that satisfies all of the participants.

### Consensus as a Process

Consensus, when described as the process used to “reach consensus” is often referred to as “consensus-building.” Consensus-building is a group process tool that emphasizes collaborative decision-making. In consensus-building, a diverse range of participants with varying interests work together to find a mutually agreeable solution. The essence of collaboration is to work with others rather than working against them.

#### Advantages of a Consensus-Building Process:

- Implements more representative decisions
- Bridges differences
- Educates constituencies
- Allows for shared power in the decision-making process
- Inclusiveness
- Fast implementation of solutions
- Creates new networks

### Consensus as a Product

“Reaching consensus” can be described as...coming to an agreement that reflects the thinking of all group members.

#### Consensus is...

FINDING A PROPOSAL acceptable enough that all members can support it and no member opposes it.

#### Consensus is not...

- ➔ Voting ~ votes do not guarantee commitment
- ➔ A unanimous vote ~ a consensus may not represent everyone’s first priorities
- ➔ A majority vote ~ in a majority vote, only the majority gets something they are happy with; people in the minority may get something they don’t want at all, which is not what consensus is all about.
- ➔ Everyone totally satisfied.

### Uses of Consensus-Building:

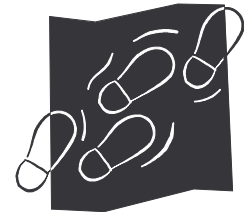
- × Attaining Consensus on a Community Issue
- × Resolving a Public Controversy
- × Developing Visions and Goals

#### REFERENCES:

- “Consensus Building Models, Methods, and Practice,” A Daniel LinaresArrietta and Lee Wallace (2000)
- “Consensus Building, A Decision-Making Process,” Marian Anderson (1998)

*Developed for use by Red River Basin Flood Damage Reduction Workgroup Project Teams*

## Steps in the Consensus-Building Process



1. The group is presented with a problem.
2. Possible solutions are brainstormed.
3. The ideas are then considered, one by one, and those that are clearly unworkable are discarded.
4. The remaining ideas are considered, and arguments (pro and con) are given. More information about the options may be sought out. During this part of the process, some group members may change their minds, bringing the group closer to consensus. NOTE: Another possibility is that group members may suggest modifications of an idea that will satisfy those who did not approve of the idea in its original form.
5. The group works within itself to agree on the two or three best (*most workable, under the circumstances*) solutions.
6. At this point the group will forward their recommendations to others for review and comment ~ or they will continue to refine their options to arrive at one preferred solution.

## Skills Helpful in Reaching Consensus

Seeking input from all members  
Defining terms  
Changing focus (*i.e. change from most desirable to least desirable*)  
Active listening  
Knowing when to take a break  
Seeking similarities and combinations  
Moving to higher levels of generality  
Using quiet time to think

Time and patience are required. Consensus can be tricky, but it's always worth the effort. Teams learn that group decisions are almost always an improvement over the individual points of view team members held before entering the group.

If you are in a group that is trying to reach consensus, remember these things:

- ➔ **Avoid arguing for your view.**
- ➔ **Don't surrender to the win/lose option when the group is stuck.**
- ➔ **Don't be wishy-washy and change your mind just to avoid conflict.**
- ➔ **Don't avoid conflict by using binding votes, flipping a coin, or cutting deals.**

## Consensus-Building

### Should be Used When:

- × An issue is complex
- × Many parties are involved
- × No one person, group or organization has control over the problem
- × The issues are negotiable
- × People are willing to participate

### Should NOT be Used When:

- × The situation is an emergency
- × Needed information is not available
- × The problem has a clear solution
- × Values or principles are at the center of the problem
- × Participants are so polarized that face-to-face negotiations are not possible
- × People are not interested in participating

**Consensus-building is a way to build trust and team spirit, secure ownership and commitment, carefully think through alternatives, avoid destructive, unresolved conflict and hard feelings, make more creative decisions, and build self-esteem.**

*Developed for use by Red River Basin Flood Damage Reduction Workgroup Project Teams*