CONSENSUS DECISION-MAKING

***Definition*:** Consensus is a cooperative process in which group members develop and agree to support a decision in the best interest of the whole.

Main reasons to use consensus as a decision-making method:

1. High quality decisions
2. Builds connection among members
3. More effective implementation

Basic Principles

Cooperation is the basis (we all get more of what we want when we cooperate)

Consensus is for people who are genuinely trying to work together, typically based on some shared interest, purpose or calling; OK if some interests are divergent, as long as sufficient joint interests are present

Search together for the best solution for the group: it's "us against the problem" we are trying to solve rather than "us against each other"

Recognize that no decision-making system gets everyone their first choice all the time

What's the creative way to address all the needs present, rather than lowest common denominator

Skills necessary for consensus are also necessary for good relationships

Consensus seeks to synthesize the wisdom of the group

Unity (different from unanimous vote or everyone's first choice)

"Sense of the meeting"—essence is something you can support or are willing to let go forward, i can live with it

"Everyone has a piece of the truth"

Value all kinds of input (rational, emotional, kinesthetic, etc.)

Consensus is a questioning process, more than an affirming process

Goal is to thrash out an issue until a good solution is found, rather than make everyone feel good by a fast but fake agreement

Encourages lifting everyone up to their highest potential, instead of knocking down your opponents

Share, question, and learn from each other's experience and thinking

Remember the spirit and process of the system are even more important than the structures

There is no substitute for being friends with each other

A positive attitude will get you everywhere

Meetings should be fulfilling—if they're not, then ask why, and change it!

What Helps It Work Well

- common purpose
- listening
- openness to ideas, feelings and experiences of others--> transformative experience, give & take
- trust (some degree)
- willingness to let go of some of your personal attachments in the best interest of the group
- focus on issues, not personalities—common ownership of ideas
  focus on interests, not positions, avoid agree/disagree; find reasons or needs behind the positions
- commitment
- time—enough to work in depth; patience (but if strong common purpose may decide quickly)
- preparation: agenda planning, facilitator prep, bringing materials, etc.

STEPS OF THE CONSENSUS PROCESS

1. Introduction to Issue (by presenter, preferably not the facilitator)

Why are we talking about this, why does it matter
History of the issue (including previous meetings)
Goal for this item at this particular meeting (report, decision, committee gather input, etc.)
Offer as issue or proposal? It depends on the issue. For example:
If small and simple, proposal may pass with relative ease
If small and complex, likely send to committee for main work
If large and simple, might be ok to start with proposal, and might take a few more meetings, possibly with some committee work in between
If large and complex, start with issue not proposal, expect it to take a series of meetings, almost always with committee or individual work in between
At end of initial presentation, others who have factual knowledge of the issue are sometimes invited to add in further bits about the history and so on—but don't let this go on too long

2. Clarifying Questions

Questions of understanding only—short and sweet

3. Discussion

Further questions
Bring out diversity of ideas, concerns, and perspectives
Deal first with values concerns or big picture, before getting into details
Note agreements and disagreements on general direction and the underlying reasons for them—discuss those underlying reasons and needs

4. Establish Basic Direction

What would best serve the whole? Sense of the meeting
General or philosophical agreement; agreement in principle

5. Synthesize or Modify Proposal as needed

Note agreements and disagreements on specifics and the underlying reasons for them—discuss those underlying reasons and needs
Generate ideas to address and resolve concerns
Evaluate potential solutions
Synthesize proposed ideas/solutions or come up with new ideas in the supportive atmosphere of the meeting
Stay aware of how much detail the whole group really needs to go into, vs. passing to committee

6. Call for Consensus

Re-state proposal clearly
Ask: "Are there any remaining unresolved concerns?"
Official decision point: Use structure for clarity, such as Agree, Stand Aside, Block
Check to see if all parties genuinely consent

7. Record

Suggest having notetaker read back decision to the group; at least re-state for notetaker
Record: decision, tasks, timeline, implementation

DECISION POINT STRUCTURE

Agreement

Basic alignment with group direction, share in sense of the meeting

Consensus is not the same thing as 100% unanimous vote in majority rule

Standard of how much agreement is enough may vary (depending on group and item)—how much agreement is sufficient to achieve solid implementation of this proposal?

May range from "This is fabulous" to "I can live with it for now"

Standing Aside

A choice to let the group proceed, while personally not feeling aligned with direction, based on:

- personal values or principles
- personal impact or need, e.g. "I can't afford this" or "I'd have to move out"
- disagreement with group direction
- intuition, not in alignment

Name in minutes and reason

Not in lead implementation role, but still bound by decision

How many is too many? Probably more than 1 (or at most 2). The more you allow, the more it's like voting; go too far and you lose the extra effectiveness of consensus action.

Blocking

Don't do prematurely, integrate your concerns into discussion early on

The following are *not* valid reasons to block:

- to get your way or because you prefer a different proposal, or no proposal
- to fulfill your personal moral values or how you want to live
- tradition; because things have always been done this way
- because the proposed action doesn't fit your personal needs (or finances)
- because you'd have to leave the group if the proposal passed
- to prevent the group from taking a risk

Only do if proposal is disastrous for the group or crosses group's known core principles—then responsible for stopping it

Legitimate blocks are most likely to arise from different interpretations of a group value, or two group values coming into conflict with each other

Inappropriate blocking being the most common cause of dysfunctional consensus process, groups benefit from having both cultural and procedural ways to address this behavior

Culture-creation may include:

- train incoming members in consensus, including what constitutes an appropriate block
- reinforce that anyone who blocks is responsible for helping to work out an alternative
- idea that half a dozen blocks for all your groups is lifetime quota
- don't allow blocks to prevent the group from continuing to talk about the issue

Procedural responses to blocks may include:

- facilitator overrule (Quakers use this, but may not be a good fit for many other groups)
- refer unresolved blocks to coordinating committee/steering council for possible overrule
- only counts if rest of group agrees it's principled ("Formal Consensus" method)
- only counts if at least one other group member agrees it's principled (Laird Schaub)
- fallback to super-majority vote (most cohousing bylaws)
- requirement that blocker organize meetings with others to work out an alternative solution, otherwise group can proceed (N Street Cohousing) **Tree's favorite option**

WORKING WITH BLOCKS & CONCERNS

Assume good-faith intentions.

Listen closely. Listen for the piece of the truth in each person's expression.

Reflect back the feelings and main points.

Look for what needs are underneath the concern.

Act as an ally of the person with the concern, while still holding the needs of the rest of the group.

Seek common ground. What part of the proposal can everyone agree to?

Remember that differing opinions are a resource. What can you learn from these different opinions?

Cultivate curiosity. Ask questions:

- What's most important about this to you?
- How do you see this idea?
- What parts of the proposal *do* you support?
- What are you worried might happen if we do this? (Could we monitor or prevent that outcome?)
- What values (or history) does this touch on (personal or group)?
- What would you like to do next?

Analyze what the origin of the difficulty is. Could be old interpersonal stuff, archetypal dynamics, job roles at odds, lack of known guidelines/procedures, need for more visioning/purpose work, information or trust-building required between a committee or individual and the rest of group, etc.

Engage the people with concerns in solving the problem. Ask them what would work for them that would also meet others' needs.

Shift formats in the meeting, change the energy.

Be ready with your procedures for how to handle a block in case one arises. For example, who gets to decide if a block is valid or not (facilitator, steering committee, full group)? What are next steps?

Stay in relationship with each other. Emphasize friendship and social connection. Be kind.

Affirm the group's creativity. Trust that a solution will emerge. Have faith.

Reflective Listening Guidelines

This is a key skill to use during conflict resolution. In your reflections, seek to:

1. Keep your attention focused on the other person (don't go into your own story)
2. Be non-judgmental
3. Listen with compassion
4. Seek the essence of what the other person is trying to convey

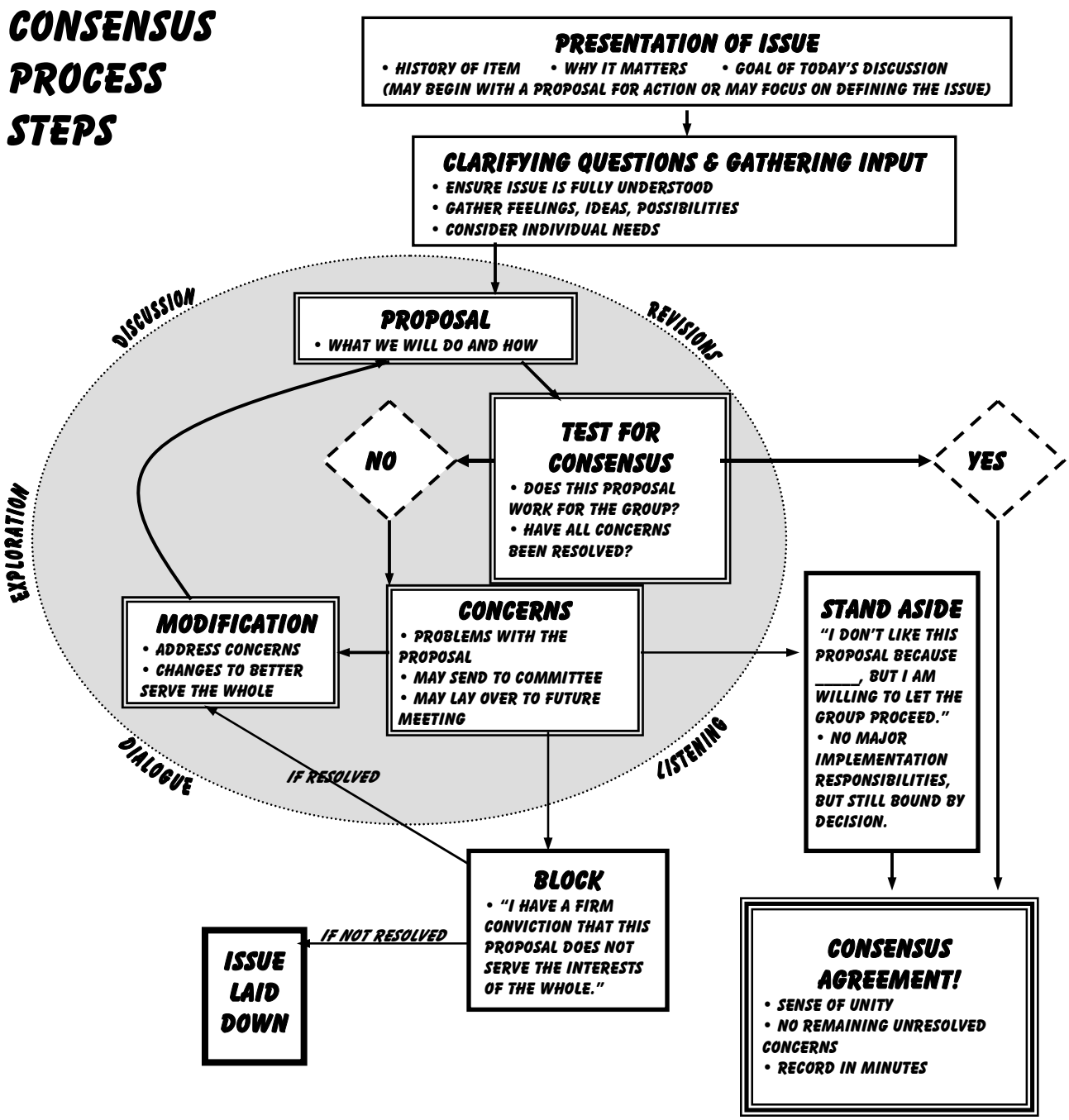
Remember the 5 basic principles of facilitation:

1. You are the servant of the group, the steward of the process
2. Plan ahead and work outside the meeting
3. Help each person feel heard
4. Work with all of what's in the room
5. Listen for common ground and reflect it back to the group, as often as necessary

Options, if a concern is unresolved and time is finished:

1. Lay it over to a future meeting
2. Send it to committee, with the person blocking included
3. Talk during a break or outside the meeting ("coffee")
4. Mediation (if interpersonal conflict)
5. Lay down the item

FLOW CHART


CONSENSUS PROCESS STEPS
PRESENTATION OF ISSUE
• HISTORY OF ITEM • WHY IT MATTERS • GOAL OF TODAY'S DISCUSSION
(MAY BEGIN WITH A PROPOSAL FOR ACTION OR MAY FOCUS ON DEFINING THE ISSUE)
CLARIFYING QUESTIONS & GATHERING INPUT
• ENSURE ISSUE IS FULLY UNDERSTOOD
• GATHER FEELINGS, IDEAS, POSSIBILITIES
• CONSIDER INDIVIDUAL NEEDS
DISCUSSION
REVISIONS
PROPOSAL
• WHAT WE WILL DO AND HOW
TEST FOR CONSENSUS
• DOES THIS PROPOSAL WORK FOR THE GROUP?
• HAVE ALL CONCERNS BEEN RESOLVED?
NO
YES
EXPLORATION
MODIFICATION
• ADDRESS CONCERNS
• CHANGES TO BETTER SERVE THE WHOLE
CONCERNS
• PROBLEMS WITH THE PROPOSAL
• MAY SEND TO COMMITTEE
• MAY LAY OVER TO FUTURE MEETING
STAND ASIDE
"I DON'T LIKE THIS PROPOSAL BECAUSE _____, BUT I AM WILLING TO LET THE GROUP PROCEED."
• NO MAJOR IMPLEMENTATION RESPONSIBILITIES, BUT STILL BOUND BY DECISION.
DIALOGUE
LISTENING
IF RESOLVED
BLOCK
• "I HAVE A FIRM CONVICTION THAT THIS PROPOSAL DOES NOT SERVE THE INTERESTS OF THE WHOLE."
IF NOT RESOLVED
ISSUE LAID DOWN
CONSENSUS AGREEMENT!
• SENSE OF UNITY
• NO REMAINING UNRESOLVED CONCERNS
• RECORD IN MINUTES

CONSENSUS QUERIES

If your group can engage with all of the queries listed here to a sense of satisfaction, then your consensus process has a high chance of success. Queries have a long tradition among Quakers (who are also very experienced practitioners of the consensus process) and there is a way in which the consensus process is, at its heart, a questioning process.

1. What is the common purpose of our group? How encompassing is it; that is, which decisions are made by the group (or its subgroups) and which by individuals? Why do we have meetings, and what are the goals of those meetings?

2. How do we orient individuals who are new to our group? How is our consensus method—both culture and procedures—taught to new members?

3. How is the self-awareness of each person supported? What do we do to help our members step toward personal growth?

4. How are friendships nourished among our members? Which relationships most need support? What else would help improve our relationships, and what can we do to make that happen?

5. What spirit do our meetings convey? Do they feel safe and welcoming? What is the energy like?

6. What steps or procedures does this group use in order to reach consensus? What is the structure of our method?

7. How do we work with dissent? Do we have a healthy balance between expecting cooperation and honoring legitimate differences, in service to the whole? What is the menu of options for constructively addressing concerns? How do we invite genuine consent rather than coercion? What is our robust procedure to deal effectively with inappropriate blocks?

8. How does the group learn together for continual improvement of its decision-making system? What feedback loops are in place? How does change happen?