Collaborative Stewardship Starter & Builder Kit

Resource: Consensus Process & Agreements

Consensus-Based Decision-Making Approach Summary

Consensus-based decision making is based on a deliberate process of consensus building, whereby **members of a group actively participate in finding a decision together that all members can feel comfortable with.** A consensus decision does not necessarily reflect complete unanimity. However, decisions reached by consensus do reflect the thoughts and feelings of the group, rather than just the majority. Effective consensus building results in decisions that have been thoughtfully deliberated, incorporate diverse experience and views, and may produce the best possible decision given the configuration of interests that have come together for a given purpose. A group committed to consensus may also utilize other forms of decision making (e.g., executive decision, majority rule) when appropriate; however, a group that has adopted a consensus model will use that process for items of strategic importance, related to core values, or around which there is a common perception that "the stakes are high."

Necessary Conditions: *Certain fundamental conditions need to be met to conduct an effective consensus-building process, including:*

- ✓ Agreement on core values
- ✓ Willingness of members to both express interests as well as assume a "disinterested" stance.
- ✓ Willingness to make it work – belief in the value of consensus-building.
- ✓ Active listening
- ✓ Sufficient time & patience
- ✓ Trust
- ✓ Succinct expression of views and concerns
- ✓ Conducive setting – properly bounded.

Participatory Core Values & Agreements: [*Note: we have found these to be helpful in group processes*]

Core Values:

- ✓ <u>Full Participation</u> – all members are encouraged to speak up and share what is on their mind.

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- ✓ <u>Mutual Understanding</u> – members understand and accept the legitimacy of one another's needs and goals.
- ✓ <u>Inclusive Solutions</u> – solutions where the range and vision are expanded through understanding and integrating everyone's perspectives and needs.
- ✓ <u>Shared Responsibility</u> – all members are willing and able to implement the proposals that they endorse and receive input before final decisions are made.

Proposed Agreements: *Each member agrees to*:

- ✓ Take responsibility for helping the group achieve a positive outcome.
- ✓ Listen very carefully to what others are saying.
- ✓ Monitor their level of participation (neither dominate nor withhold)
- ✓ Be aware of the purpose, stay on topic.
- ✓ Engage with, build on, respond to the ideas of others.
- ✓ Express disagreement or concerns constructively and with respect.
- ✓ Be aware of how both verbal and non-verbal signals impact group dynamics.
- ✓ Avoid side conversations when we are conducting business in the group.
- ✓ Be fully present.

Consensus

When determining a level of agreement on a recommendation, option, or idea, each partner will use the table below to indicate whether they can support or abide by it, and do not object; if no one objects, then consensus exists. Consensus items will be documented in meeting summaries.

If anyone objects to a recommendation, option, or idea, then there is not consensus. Additional deliberation and efforts to address concerns, identify additional options, and achieve consensus on a final recommendation will be conducted to the extent possible. Differing perspectives will be documented in meeting summaries along with the rationale for supportive and dissenting views.

	Consensus exists if ALL participants are at level 1 or 2
1	I **support** this recommendation, option, or idea.
2	I do not fully agree with the decision, however, **I can abide by or live with** this recommendation, option, or idea; I do not object.
3	I **object** to this recommendation, option, or idea; I cannot support, live with, or abide by it.

Modified from a Practice & Guide to Consensus-Based Decision Making (Madden & Ontario, 2017); Facilitator's Guide to Participatory Decision Making (Community at Work, 2007)   2

Proposed Process

Consensus-building is a quintessentially dialogical, emergent human process that incorporates thought, feeling, knowledge, imagination, and lived experience. Nonetheless, it is a process that can be undertaken deliberately and can be navigated as follows.

1. *A proposal or an issue will emerge*. First, the people connected with the proposal/issue explain it, so the issue is stated in clear terms.
2. *Those present discuss the issue*. Each member expresses their thoughts and feelings honestly and succinctly; rather than repeating what has already been well-expressed, a member can simply indicate agreement with others.
3. *A common answer to the issue may emerge during discussion with a self-evident decision presenting itself.* The decision is stated in positive terms and all questions and concerns have been satisfied to the point that all can agree. If so, consensus has been reached and is noted.
4. *If consensus is not reached, a second round may be initiated by the facilitator*. Each member in turn has an equal amount of time to comment on the issue, without interruption and without comments from the others (although questions may be asked for clarification only when the person is finished). The facilitator summarizes what was said and clarifies the status of the issue.
5. *Individual differences may have merged during the round into a common answer.* If group agreement is reached, the consensus is recorded.
6. *If consensus is still not achieved, a third round may be undertaken*.
7. *If consensus is still not achieved, the group must decide* (a). Whether progress is being made and further rounds may result in consensus, or (b). Whether one or more of the necessary conditions for consensus are not currently being met and if so whether an adjustment can be made to accommodate, or (c). there is some fundamental split in the group, such as a divergence among some members around core values. The matter under contention would point to the value(s) in need of clarification.

Optional Stances Members Can Take

Expression of concern: Rather than taking a hard-and-fast negative position, members express their concerns and the reasons for them. This allows room for proposals to be modified to meet the concerns.

Reservations: After fulsome deliberation, one or more members may find a concern has not been satisfactorily addressed, but that they consider that concern minor. The member(s) would

then indicate that they have reservations. They might say "I still have some unresolved concerns; I have reservations, but I can live with it."

Non-support or standing aside: This stance allows a member to be clear that they do not agree with or support the proposed decision, without leaving or blocking the group from proceeding. The member might say, "I personally don't support this, but I won't stop others from doing it."

Blocking or withdrawing from the group: "I cannot support this or allow the group to support this. I perceive it to be in contradiction of our core values and/or unethical or immoral." Blocking should only be used very rarely without threatening the viability of the group. It should be a last resort.

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