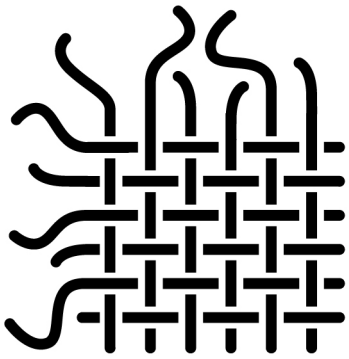


**Seeds for  
Change  
Short guide**



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# **Introduction to consensus decision making**

**A short guide to collaborative decision-making for activist groups, co-ops and communities**

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# Consensus decision making

Consensus decision making is a creative and dynamic way of reaching agreement in a group. Instead of simply voting for an item and having the majority getting their way, a consensus group is committed to finding solutions that everyone actively supports – or at least can live with.

By definition, in consensus no decision is made against the will of an individual or a minority. If significant concerns remain unresolved, a proposal can be blocked and prevented from going ahead. This means that the whole group has to work hard to find win-win solutions that address everyone's needs.

Consensus is used widely by people around the world working towards a more just and equitable society: from small voluntary groups, co-operatives and campaign networks to businesses, local communities and, in some cultures, across much wider regions.

## Top Tips



**Consensus is about co-operation between equals.** The exact process that groups use may vary, but putting these values in practice will always be the key to making consensus work.

**Explore your differences.** People often shy away from conflict or get into arguments to prove they're right. However, the key to finding win-win solutions is to understand all the different needs and perspectives before forming a proposal.

**Be very clear when you make a decision** so everyone goes away with a shared understanding of what has been agreed. Before finalising a decision, test to check there really is agreement.

# Why use consensus?

Consensus enables a group to **share power** - everyone who is fundamentally affected by a decision can work together to find solutions that meet everyone's needs. It's about working with each other rather than for or against each other.

It helps to build a **stronger community**. Consensus relies on us respecting other people's needs and opinions, and being open and honest about our own needs. This in turn leads to better relationships in a group.

**Making better decisions:** Consensus is looking for 'win-win' solutions that are acceptable to all. That doesn't mean everyone has to completely agree on their favourite solution all the time - but nor should anyone have to compromise too much. The idea is to weave together all the best ideas and address all the key concerns to find something that works for everyone - a process that often results in surprising and creative solutions, inspiring both the individual and the group as whole.

**Getting things done:** When everyone agrees with a decision they are much more likely to implement it. In the long run, people are also more likely to stay involved in a group that is committed to hearing their views and meeting their needs. This is particularly important in voluntary groups, where most people vote with their feet and leave if they don't feel valued and respected.

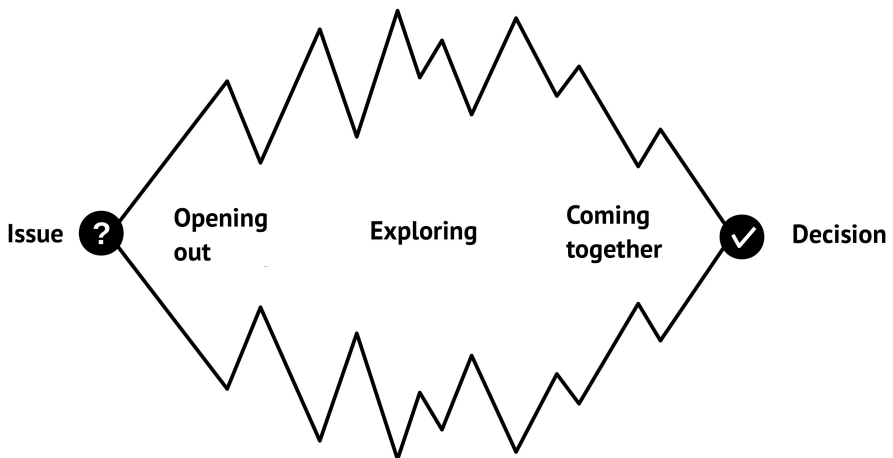
Consensus **protects minority needs and opinions**. By definition, in consensus no decision is made against the will of an individual or a minority. If significant concerns remain unresolved, a proposal can be blocked and prevented from going ahead. This means that the whole group has to work hard at finding solutions that address everyone's concerns rather than ignoring or overruling minority opinions.

# The decision making process

Each group uses a slightly different process to reach consensus - with different degrees of structure and formality. The key to making it work is for everyone to express their needs and viewpoints clearly, and for the group to use this information to find a solution which builds on the common ground and resolves differences.

The diagram below shows the 'journey' that groups usually go on in a good consensus process.

To begin with, the issue may seem simple, but the discussion soon **opens out** as people bring different perspectives, information and ideas to the table. The group then **explores** all the different options, wants and needs. This middle part of the discussion can feel quite messy – it can be hard to see the way forward when everyone is grappling with lots of ideas and different people's needs. You may think you are coming to agreement and then a new factor comes up and you have to go back to exploring differences (as represented by the spikes in the diagram). Don't lose heart! This exploration is necessary in order to get a good understanding of where everyone is coming from. This in turn enables the group to **come together** in finding a solution which genuinely has everyone's support.



## The process: step by step

This more detailed step by step guide can help a group go through the process of opening out the discussion and coming back together in a decision as efficiently as possible. The process isn't always as linear as these models suggest – we may jump ahead and then go back and repeat some stages. But having these stages in mind can help you keep moving forward while staying focused on trying to meet everyone's needs.

Start by **introducing and clarifying the issue**. This ensures that everyone has the relevant background information and the group is clear about the remit of the discussion and key questions to resolve.

It can be tempting to launch straight into problem solving. However, a key stage in consensus is **opening out the discussion** to allow everyone to share their feelings, needs and opinions, *before* trying to find a solution. Recognising all the different things that are going on for people first is essential for finding a solution which suits everyone. Resist the temptation to make proposals at this stage. If ideas come up you could hear them briefly and then park them for the next stage.

Once you've got a good understanding of what is important to people, you can collect and **explore all the ideas** for moving forward. Looking at the pros and cons of different ideas helps the group with really understanding everyone's key needs and concerns.

The group then looks for common ground and weeds out some of the options, combining all the useful bits into a **proposal**.

Clarifying and **amending the proposal** helps to address any remaining concerns.

**Test for agreement** by clearly stating the final proposal and asking people to signal whether they agree or disagree. This stage is important to check if there are concerns that haven't been heard. If you don't have consensus go back to an appropriate earlier stage in the process.

Finally work out how to **implement** the decision. Making sure group decisions are acted on is essential for building trust in your meetings.

# A consensus flowchart

## Stage 1: Introduce and clarify the issue

Share background information. Work out the remit of the discussion - i.e. what questions do you need to decide about now?



## Stage 2: Open out the discussion

Make space for everyone to share their needs and opinions before launching into trying to solve the problem. If ideas come up already, you could hear them briefly, then park them for the next stage.



## Stage 3: Explore ideas in a broad discussion

Come up with lots of different ways forward. Explore the pros and cons of different options. Identify key concerns, needs and objectives.



## Stage 4: Form a proposal

Look for a solution that meets everyone's most important needs. This might involve weaving together elements of different ideas.



## Stage 5: Amend the proposal

Look for changes that will make the proposal even stronger.



## Stage 6: Test for agreement

Clearly state the proposal and check whether there is real agreement. Starting by asking for who is against the proposal makes it easier for people to voice their concerns. E.g.:

Any **blocks**?

Any **stand-asides**?

Any **reservations**?

Do we have **consensus**?

If you have a block, or too many stand-asides you will need to go back a stage, and amend the proposal further, or create a new one.



## Stage 7: Work out how to implement the decision

Work out what needs to happen, by when, and who will do it!

# Agreement and disagreement

There are many different reasons why someone might not agree with a proposal. For example you might have fundamental issues with it and want to stop it from going ahead, or you might not have time to implement the decision or the idea just doesn't excite you.

Consensus decision-making recognises this – it's not trying to achieve unanimity but looks for a solution that everyone involved is OK with. Not all types of disagreement stop a group from reaching consensus. Think about it as a spectrum from completely agreeing to completely objecting to a proposal.

The words used to describe the different types of agreement and disagreement vary from group to group. It's important to be clear in your group what options you are using and what they mean. Here is a common set of options:

- Agreement with the proposal
- Reservations
- Stand Aside
- Block

**Agreement with the proposal:** 'I support the proposal and am willing to help implement it.'

**Reservations:** You are willing to let the proposal go ahead but want to make the group aware you aren't happy with it. You may even put energy into implementing it once your concerns have been acknowledged.

**Stand aside:** You want to object, but not block the proposal. This means you won't help to implement the decision, but you are willing for the group to go ahead with it. You might stand aside because you disagree with the proposal, or you might like the decision but be unable to support it because you don't have the time or energy.

The group may be happy to accept the stand aside and go ahead, or they

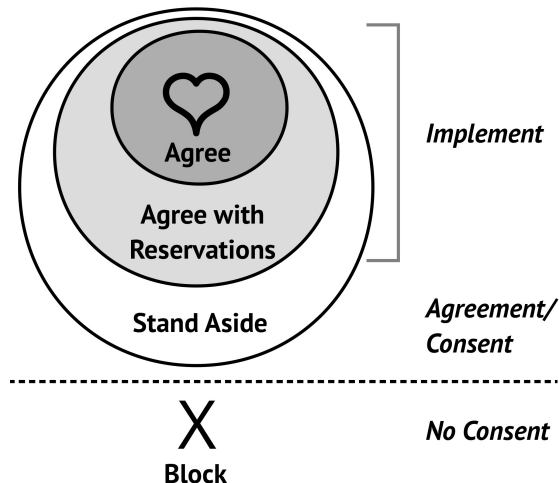


may work on a new proposal. A critical question is whether the proposal requires everyone to implement it. For example, it might be fine for some people not to get involved in particular group activities. On the other hand, if the group agrees a health and safety policy, it is vital that everyone is willing to put it in practice.

**Block:** A block always stops a proposal from going ahead. It expresses a fundamental objection. It isn't "I don't really like it," or "I liked the other idea better." Some groups say the block means "I'll need to leave the group if this goes ahead". The group can either start work on a new proposal, or look for amendments to overcome the objection. In cases where the block stems from a fundamental disagreement with the aims of the group it might be more appropriate for the individual to leave.

In an ideal consensus process a block wouldn't happen since any major concerns about a proposal should be addressed before the decision stage. However, sometimes people aren't able to express their concerns clearly enough, or aren't heard by the group. In such situations the block acts as a safeguard to ensure that decisions are supported by everyone.

Being able to block is an integral part of consensus, but it comes with a big responsibility. A block stops other people from doing something that they would like to do, and it should therefore only be used if serious concerns are unresolved.



## Top tips for participating in consensus decisions



**Be willing to work towards the solution that's best for everyone**, not just what's best for you. Be flexible and willing to give up your favourite idea if there's another solution that meets your core needs.

**Help to create a respectful and trusting atmosphere.** Make space for everyone to express their ideas and opinions, and remember we all have different needs, values and ways of communicating.

**Be open and honest about the reasons for your view points and if possible.** Express your concerns early on in the process so that they can be taken into account in any proposals.

**Listen actively to what people are trying to say.** Make an effort to understand someone's position and their underlying needs, concerns and emotions. If you don't understand try to say so.

**Don't be afraid of disagreement and conflict.** Differences of opinion are natural and we need to know what they are in order to come up with a good decision. Easily reached consensus may cover up the fact that some people don't feel safe or confident enough to express their disagreements.

## Conditions for consensus

Consensus is much easier when certain conditions are in place in a group. If your group is struggling, this checklist should help identify underlying issues you need to address in order to have a better experience of consensus. While the conditions aren't met, it can sometimes be better to use a different method to make a decision (e.g. voting).

**Common Goal:** Everyone in the group needs to share a clear common goal and be willing to work together towards it. That could be a particular vision for your community, or an injustice you are working together to stop. It is easy to assume everyone is pulling in the same direction – but your group will be in a much stronger position if you take time to explore your aims together. What does each person want to achieve and how do you expect to get there? Share your agreed goals with new members so they know what they are getting into! If major differences come up later, try re-visiting your aims to remind yourselves of the things you have in common, and get clear on how fundamental your differences really are.

**Commitment to consensus:** Everyone needs to be willing to really give it a go. This means sticking with the process when you disagree, instead of jumping to a majority vote. It also means being prepared to work at building equality in the group, and learning to recognise and value your differences.

**Trust and openness:** Consensus means being deeply honest with yourself, and the rest of the group, about what you really *need* to happen, and what is just a preference. Finding win-win solutions often relies on people being flexible about their preferences to meet all the core needs. This requires trust. We need to feel safe to express our needs – and also to give up some of the things we want, in the knowledge that other people will do the same for us. Take time to build relationships within the group to enable people to be more open with each other.

**Sufficient time:** for making decisions and for learning to work by consensus. Taking time to make a good decision now can save wasting time revisiting a bad one later.

**Clear process:** It's essential to have a clear process for making decisions and to make sure everyone has a shared understanding of how it works.

**Active participation:** In consensus we all need to actively participate. We need to listen to what everyone has to say, voice our thoughts and feelings about the matter and pro-actively look for solutions that include everyone.

# Facilitation

Facilitation is about supporting a group to have an effective and inclusive meeting. Often, meetings have one or two facilitators. Their role is to help the group make decisions and work together creatively and efficiently. In a small group it can also work to have everyone responsible for making the meeting work, instead of appointing a facilitator.

Facilitation tasks include: setting up the meeting space so everyone can be comfortable; helping the group prepare an agenda; keeping people focused on one topic at a time until a decision is reached; making space for everyone to think and express themselves during the meeting; listening to all the different points and providing summaries to help the group work out a fair decision; helping the group to address conflict if it arises.

The facilitators shouldn't have any more power than anyone else and should stay neutral on the issues under discussion. They're not there to make all the proposals and decide things for a group. They can only do their job with everyone's support and co-operation.

## Group structure

Consensus decision making isn't just about what happens in a meeting. It also depends on how the whole group is organised.

A key democratic principle is that decisions should be made by people who are fundamentally affected by them. This makes it important that everyone is able to contribute to big decisions which impact on the whole group. For example, decisions about your strategy, vision and policies.

However, that doesn't mean everyone has to be involved in every single decision. You could create working groups that take responsibility for different areas like publicity and organising events. Or make individuals responsible for particular tasks, like managing the bank account.

These working groups or individuals can then take smaller, day-to-day decisions without taking everything back to the whole group. For example, the whole group might agree a food policy – but let the kitchen team decide what’s on the menu and where they will do the shopping!

# Key skills for consensus

## Active listening

When we actively listen we suspend our own thought processes and give the speaker our full attention. We make a deliberate effort to understand someone’s position and their needs, concerns and emotions. Active listening can include asking questions to get clear about what someone means or to encourage them to say more.

## Summarising

A succinct and accurate summary of what’s been said so far can really help a group move towards a decision. Outline the emerging common ground as well as the unresolved differences: “It seems like we’ve almost reached agreement on that bit of the proposal, but we need to explore this part further to address everyone’s concerns.” Check with everyone that you’ve got it right.

## Synthesis

Bringing together different ideas and trying to find a proposal that is agreeable to everyone is at the core of consensus. We call this process *synthesis*: finding connections between seemingly competing ideas and weaving them together to form proposals.

It is common for people to enter a discussion with strong views on concrete options they do and don't like. This is particularly the case when the discussion starts with only one option on the table, and people in the

group end up taking sides according to whether they want it or not. Finding a way forward often involves taking a step backwards and exploring the reasons why people are into different options. This in turn helps you identify core concerns and things people are trying to achieve - which form the basis of the new, synthesised ideas.

## **Consensus in large groups**

It can be more challenging to use consensus in larger groups. It becomes more important to split up responsibilities so you spend less time with everyone in the same meeting. However there will be some issues where you do need make decisions with everyone together. Here are a few extra methods to help everyone participate.

### **Working groups**

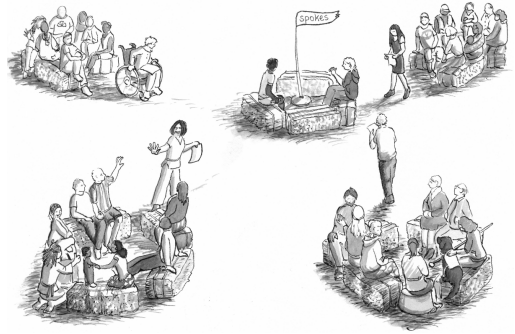
If you organise your group with different teams, or 'working groups' responsible for different things, then there are much fewer decisions that need to be taken all together. Make sure there is good communication between working groups and the whole group - e.g. regular reports on working group activities, and opportunities to offer feedback.

### **Small groups within a big meeting**

Even when a large group needs to discuss an issue, you can split the meeting up into smaller groups for the discussion stage to make it easier for more people to join in. Small groups can help everyone think through the issue and come up with ideas, before going back to the whole group to take the discussion further.

# Spokescouncil

The spokescouncil process can be used when a very large group is taking a decision together. In this process the whole group breaks up into smaller groups who then communicate with each other through 'spokes' (also called delegates or representatives).



**The process:** the small groups start by discussing the issue(s) to come up with concerns and ideas. Spokes (delegates) from each group then meet up in a spokescouncil to feed back these thoughts. The spokescouncil uses this information to create one or more proposals. These are discussed back in the small groups to check for any amendments and agreement. The results of these discussions are taken to the spokescouncil who should be able to either confirm agreement or draw up new proposals for further discussion. In this way the power to make decisions lies firmly with the small groups, not the spokes.

**The spoke's role** is to feed back information between the small group and the spokescouncil. The spoke needs to act as a voice for everyone within the small group, communicating the breadth of collective thought rather than just their own personal point of view. Being the spoke carries a lot of responsibility to represent information accurately and not to manipulate the process.

Generally spokes don't make decisions for their group but always check back for agreement before a decision is finalised. However, an individual small group may empower their spoke to take decisions within agreed parameters.

Rotating the role of spoke from meeting to meeting is a good idea, as is having two spokes, one of them presenting the viewpoints and proposals from their small group, the other to take notes of what other groups have to say. This helps to ensure that ideas don't get lost or misrepresented.

# Consensus decision making

Consensus is a way of reaching agreement in a group that is creative and co-operative. Instead of voting on a decision and having a majority of the group get their way, consensus means working together to find win-win solutions everyone supports. All decisions are made with the consent of everyone who is fundamentally affected, meaning that everyone's core needs are taken into account.

This guide offers a short introduction to the values and principles of consensus, a common process for reaching consensus decisions, and offers tips and suggestions for making it work in practice. Also includes sections on core skills and using consensus in large groups.

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