

Collaborative Decision-making Methods: Consensus

Group Consensus

In professional situations, a particularly attractive decision-making method is based on the process of coming to consensus. When a decision requires buy-in and follow through on the part of those involved, it makes sense to consider using a consensus decision-making process.

However, the process does take time and it requires considerable maturity and skill on the part of participants. People must be able to listen to each other, agree to disagree, and try to find common ground so that consensus can be reached.

Edgar Schein, a distinguished professor at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, suggests using the following definition of consensus:

Consensus means that group members can say:

- You understand my point of view
- I understand your point of view
- Most importantly, whether or not I prefer this decision, I will support it because it was reached openly and fairly

The above definition of consensus underlines the importance of establishing a environment in which people can share their ideas, express their concerns, question each other, all in the interest of coming to a decision that everyone feels has been reached in an appropriate and fair manner.

In many educational situations, where there is a strong commitment to a shared vision and professional commitment to realistic goals, reaching consensus can be an enjoyable and highly positive experience. Unfortunately, where there is a lack of direction within a school, especially one in which a shared vision has not been developed, trying to reach consensus may result in considerable frustration.

In addition, it is important to consider whether members of the group who are involved in making the decision have the collaboration and listening skills that are needed to engage in the meaningful exchange that is so essential in the consensus decision-making process.

Thus, leaders and groups who are trying to select the most appropriate decision-making method need to consider whether the consensus decision making method is appropriate for their situation. However, it should be noted that taking the time to build the capacity of a group so that they can use the consensus decision-making process is a very valuable capacity building initiative that can be of great value to any organization.

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Using the following acronym-based CLEAR process has proven to be helpful when groups are trying to make consensus-based decisions.

CLEAR - Consensus Decision-making Process

Clarify the question

Listen to understand

Evaluate progress

Address differences

Review the results and process

Let us consider some of the key aspects in the CLEAR process:

Clarify the question:

- Take the time to create a clear question
- Determine if people are interested in the question
- Record the wording of the question on paper or digital flipchart
- Encourage questions about the clarity of the question
- Review the meaning of “consensus”

Listen to understand:

- Begin to share potential solutions
- Build on the ideas of other people
- Ask people to clarify their ideas or solutions
- Allow people to share their ideas, even those that seem “far out”

Evaluate progress:

- Use the Hand Signal Method described earlier to assess agreement
- If one of the last three signals is used, the people using them should explain why as this will encourage a broader understanding of what is needed to reach consensus
- After using the hand signal method, try to identify key differences so people can address them.

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Address issues:

- Encourage people to adapt positions to try and reach consensus
- Listen carefully to those who disagree
- Those opposing consensus should be asked: What do you need to see for you to support consensus?
- People should not change their positions unless they feel their concerns have been met

Review result and process:

- A sensible guideline for consensus is when 70% of those voting agree with the consensus position
- People should have an opportunity to state their agreement or disagreement with the consensus decision
- People should discuss the quality of the process and whether they felt that the process was a fair one so that they can support the decision even if they did not vote for it

Group Consensus Decision-making with Timeline

A variation of the consensus decision-making method is for the leader to clearly outline the nature of the decision that must be made and empower the group to make a decision based on the consensus decision-making process. In addition, the leader indicates a date by which the decision must be made. If a decision based on consensus cannot be reached by the target date the leader will then have the right to use whatever decision-making method that he or she decides to use to make the decision. Experience has shown that this method often motivates the group to work systematically towards consensus and the target date tends to focus the attention of the group on the decision that must be made.

Selected References

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