

FORMAL CONSENSUS

A MODEL FOR MANAGEMENT AND COMMUNITY ORGANIZATION

FORMAL CONSENSUS:

- * Specific kind of decision making.
- * Provides: foundation, structure & collection of techniques for efficient and productive group discussions.
- * Has specific rules of conduct and roles (just like Robert's Rules of Order).
- * Works best in groups with a common purpose or goals.

Advantages:

- * Non-violent.
- * Decisions reflect will of entire group and not just the leaders.
- * Ownership of decisions by all and therefore, plans are carried out with greater satisfaction.
- * Two or more heads are better than one.

Disadvantages

- * Requires practice and commitment for active cooperation, disciplined speaking, listening, respect.
- * Rules have to be learned.
- * Requires investment of time to reach decision - but decision reached well supported by group.

Group dynamics: A group is a number of individuals having some unifying relationship.

Formal Consensus Defined: Developed by C. T. Butler and Amy Rothstein in a large group setting. Consensus, as a decision making process, has been developing for centuries. In the consensus process, only proposals which intend to accomplish the common purpose are considered. During discussion of a proposal, everyone works to improve the proposal to make it the best decision for the group. All proposals are adopted unless the group decides it is contrary to the best interests of the group.

Decisions are adopted when all participants consent to the result of discussion about the original proposal. People who do not agree with a proposal are responsible for expressing their concerns. No decision is adopted until there is resolution of every concern. When concerns remain after discussion, individuals can agree to disagree by acknowledging that they have unresolved concerns, but consent to the proposal anyway and allow it to be adopted. This structure creates a separation between the *identification* and the *resolution* of concerns. This predictable structure provides opportunities to those who don't feel empowered to participate.

- * Conflict is encouraged, supported and resolved cooperatively with respect, non-violence and creativity... it is desirable!
- * Majority rule/competition vs. Consensus/cooperation:

Majority Rule is a competitive dynamic created because the group is being asked to choose between two or more possibilities. Ideas are owned by individuals and defended in the face of improvements as they seek to gain the support of 51 % of the group.

Consensus is a cooperative dynamic where one proposal (idea) is considered at a time. Everyone works together to make the best decision for the group. All voices are heard. Ideas are shared by the group = solutions shared by 100% of the group.

Characteristics of formal consensus:

- * Consensus is the least violent decision making process. The will of minority taken into account... everyone is respected. It lacks power to dominate... all contributions are valued.
- * It is the most democratic decision making process. It is inclusive... encourages participation... equal access to power... develops cooperation, empowerment. It creates a sense of individual responsibility for group synthesis and evolution vs. competition/attrition.
- * It is based on principles of the group. Objections must address concerns of the individual and be in the best interest of the group as a whole.
- * Works better when more people participate. Ideas build one upon the next = creative interplay.
- * Not inherently time consuming... works better with patience as any process does.
- * Cannot be secretly disrupted if practiced as taught - disruptive behavior must not be tolerated.

STRUCTURE OF FORMAL CONSENSUS

Levels or Cycles:

The purpose of defining levels is to allow the introduction of additional structure into the discussion to help resolve concerns and reach consensus.

LEVEL ONE: Broad scope to consider philosophical/political implications, general merits, drawbacks and other relevant information. The focus is on the proposal as a whole.

LEVEL TWO: Discussion limited to the general or overall concerns, they are identified and listed. The focus is on resolving the entire body of concerns or groups of similar concerns.

LEVEL THREE: Scope is very narrow. The focus is to limit discussion to a single unresolved concern, remaining until resolved. This proves requires strong facilitation and discussion techniques.

FLOW OF FORMAL CONSENSUS PROCESS

Ideally, proposals are submitted in writing and briefly introduced first time on the agenda.

* **INTRODUCTION OF PROPOSAL BY FACILITATOR**

- introduces individual presenting the proposal - gives short update/previous action.
- explains process which brought proposal to meeting.
- explains process to consensus/insure all understand structure.

Proposal must be written and distributed (when possible in advance of the meeting); presenter reads out loud with background information; addresses benefits, reasons to adopt and concerns that pre-exist.

* **LEVEL ONE: BROAD DISCUSSION (GROUP OF CONCERNS)**

- Philosophical/political debate: How proposal may effect group.
- Individual concern not the focus.
- Comments/ideas/other factual discussion.
- General problem entertained.
- Facilitator or presenter of proposal calls for consensus.

* **CALL FOR CONSENSUS**

Facilitator asks: “Are there any unresolved concerns?”/ “Concerns Remaining?” If no concerns... facilitator declares consensus reached and proposal is read or submitted for the record. Allow for silence to encourage everyone to be at peace with consensus. Any concerns for which someone stands aside are listed with the proposal and become part of it. If concerns remain...

* **LEVEL TWO: BRAINSTORM TO LIST CONCERNS AS A WHOLE**

Discussion begins with brainstorming to identify and list all concerns. Facilitator diverts efforts to defend proposal or resolve concerns. After listed, group reflects on concerns as a whole, then discussion and attempt to resolve as a whole...not focused on one particular concern. Do comments resolve concerns? If yes, call for consensus. If concerns remain...

* **LEVEL THREE: INDIVIDUAL CONCERNS**

Restate concerns one at a time (resolved concerns are removed) One concern: Questions which clarify the concern to achieve understanding before discussion begins: focus on suggestions, ideas to resolve. Repeat process until all are resolved. If concern/s remain...

* **CLOSING OPTIONS**

1. Withdraw Concern: “Standing Aside:

Voluntary withdrawn: Facilitator asks if person/s with the concern are willing to “stand aside”, acknowledge that the concern still exists and allow adoption of the proposal. The unresolved concern is written down with the proposal in the record and becomes part of the proposal:

2. Send proposal to committee (or postpone decision until next meeting). If time allows:

- Committee clarifies the concern/s, bring new and creative resolutions for the group.
- Committee represents those who voiced the concerns and those most supportive of the proposal.

3. Declare a block to proposal

Facilitator recognizes all levels followed, time out, major concerns remain unresolved. The group is unwilling to allow more time or send the proposal to committee so the facilitator must declare the proposal blocked and move to the next agenda item.

RULES OF FORMAL CONSENSUS

1. Ground rules must be understood by all at the onset of any meeting to create a safe and productive environment for decision making. If the group can not agree to abide by the basic principles that support consensus, then the process will not work.
2. Once a decision has been adopted by consensus, it cannot be changed without reaching new consensus.
3. One person speaks at any moment. (Role of peacekeeper/facilitator exempt from this rule to maintain order.)
4. All structural decisions (i.e., agenda contract, order of presentation, etc.) Are adopted with and after debate. Discussed before consensus.
5. All content decisions (i.e., committee reports, proposals, etc.) Are adopted with and after debate. Discussed before consensus.
6. A concern must be based upon principles of the group to justify a block to consensus.
7. Every meeting which uses formal consensus must have evaluation.

CONFLICT AND CONSENSUS

This concept involves group's honest assessment of ability to honor the principles.

- * Group must have statement of purpose/constitution that includes principles and values.
- The environment promotes these consensus supporting principles:
 - TRUST:** Examination of attitudes; open to new ideas; acknowledge and appreciate personal and cultural differences.
 - RESPECT:** Listen; no interruptions; take ideas seriously; criticize act, not the person; validate emotional and logical concerns.
 - UNITY OF PURPOSE:** A basic understanding about goals and purpose of group is shared.
 - NON-VIOLENCE:** Nonviolent decision makers use their power to achieve goals while respecting differences and cooperating with others, do not use power to dominate or control the group process.
 - SELF EMPOWERMENT:** All participate and think for themselves. If members of a group delegate their authority, intentionally or not, they fail to accept responsibility for the group's decisions.
 - COOPERATION:** Shared responsibility in finding solutions to all concerns.
 - CONFLICT RESOLUTION:** Conflict is expression of disagreement and diverse viewpoints; focus and explore strengths and weaknesses of attitudes, assumptions and plans; work together to discover which choice is best for all members; creates growth; engenders and requires patience.
 - COMMITMENT TO GROUP:** Personal responsibility to behave with respect, good will and honesty; group needs prioritized over desires of an individual.
 - ACTIVE PARTICIPATION:** Process of synthesis promotes trust by creating atmosphere where every contribution is considered valuable.
 - EQUAL ACCESS TO POWER:** Avoid hierarchical structures by sharing power, skills, information; roles shared.
 - PATIENCE:** More time to allow for creative interplay of ideas.
- The environment mitigates the following impediments to consensus:
 - LACK OF TRAINING:** It is necessary to train people in the theory and practice of consensus, offer regular opportunities for training.
 - EXTERNAL HIERARCHICAL STRUCTURES:** It can be extremely frustrating if those external to the group can disrupt the decision making by interfering with the process by pulling rank.
 - SOCIAL PREJUDICE:** Biases interfere with the spirit of cooperation and equal participation,

DEGREES OF CONFLICT

- * Group determines a concern's legitimacy based on principles of the group/relevance to the group as a whole.
- * If reasonable solution is offered and not accepted by the individual raising the concern, the group may decide the concern is resolved and individual is out of order for failing to recognize it.
- * Individual expresses concern and the group resolves the concern.
- * Blocking concern must be based on group principle, not individual preference, must be essential to group's welfare.

EVALUATION

Time at the end of the meeting that is devoted to:

- * Improvement of structure of process/dynamics of the group.
- * Process interactions between members
- * No discussion nor opportunity to comment on each others statements
- * Not intended to re-open debate on agenda item
- * Express feelings; highlight problems; faster communication
- * Praise facilitator, members, process
- * Focus on learning/growing
- * Avoid blaming
- * Open to pleasure of group

ROLES

AGENDA PLANNERS:

- * collect items/arrange
- * assign presenters
- * brainstorm discussion techniques
- * set time limits
- * write up proposed agenda

FACILITATOR: “to make easy” “good will”

- * conducts group business/guides formal consensus process
- * role rotated for power/skill sharing
- * co-facilitation for balance (gender/ethnic/age, etc.)
- * non-directive leadership, responsibility for:
 1. moving through agenda in allotted time
 2. guiding the process
 3. suggesting alternate/additional techniques

- * if facilitator wants to participate, s/he **must** relinquish role and speak as an individual
- * needs of group, balance input
- * clarity of process; review what happens
- * responsible for honoring agenda contract

PEACEKEEPER: Large group/controversial topics - selected w/o debate

- * not personally invested in discussion
- * tensions are up, peacekeeper steps in to remind group of common goals and commitment to cooperation
- * may call for moment/s of silence
- * comments always directed to group not individual
- * points out when group did something well

ADVOCATE: Selected w/o debate/last resort

- * interrupt meeting when someone is unable to be understood, invite individual to step outside and discuss one to one to review concern and its relationship to the best interest of the group.
- * presents the concern to the group for the individual.

TIMEKEEPER: makes the facilitator/group aware of the time remaining in discussion

PUBLIC SCRIBE: writing for group to see process

NOTE TAKER: makes written record of the content of meeting

- * post decision (if no scribe), read notes for accuracy
- * record accurately for group access

DOORKEEPER: welcomes people, distributes literature, informs of pertinent information

TECHNIQUES

- Clarifies point of information vs. debate
- Equalizing participation
- Listening
- Stacking: organize order of speakers
- Pacing: flow of meeting
- Checking the process
- Silence
- Censoring: used to control individual who breaks rules/structure (by facilitator)
- ↳ Expulsion: individual removed for extreme disruption
- Call for consensus
- Summarizing
- Reformulating the proposal
- Stepping out of role
- Passing the clipboard: collect information
- Polling: used cautiously
- Taking a break

Group discussion techniques:

- Identification: names
- Whole group
- Small group
- Go rounds - inclusion
- Active listening: repeat
- Caucusing: to clarify points
- Brainstorming
- Fishbowl: inner group within larger group discuss

PROCESS OF FORMAL CONSENSUS

INTRODUCTIONS

INTRODUCTION BY FACILITATOR
PROPOSAL BY PRESENTER
QUESTIONS TO CLARIFY PROPOSAL

LEVEL ONE: BROAD CONSENSUS

GENERAL DISCUSSION
CALL FOR CONSENSUS ► **NO** **YES** ►
▼

LEVEL TWO: GROUPS OF CONCERNS

LIST ALL CONCERNS RESOLUTION
OF CONCERNS
CALL FOR CONSENSUS ► **NO** **YES** ►
▼

LEVEL THREE: INDIVIDUAL CONCERNS

RESTATE EACH CONCERN
QUESTIONS TO CLARIFY CONCERN

DISCUSS THE CONCERN
EACH CONCERN RESOLVED??
CALL FOR CONSENSUS ► **NO** **YES** ►
▼

WITHDRAW CONCERN/STAND ASIDE
(reflected in minutes)
SEND PROPOSAL TO COMMITTEE
DECLARE THE PROPOSAL BLOCKED

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CONCERNS THAT SHOW UP REPEATEDLY SHOULD BE REVIEWED