

CONSENSUS DECISION-MAKING

Teams and leaders often tell me they “work by consensus,” described this way: A group discusses an issue or proposal. At some point, hearing no serious dissent, the meeting leader declares, “it seems we agree.” Clients ask why, after meetings, folks express strong reservations or opposition. Sometimes people even divide into factions—those committed to the decision and those who hang back.

The more complex and/or contentious the issue, the more important it is to begin consensus building with mutual understanding of what coming to consensus involves. As I work with organizations on long term projects, I see sturdier decisions and greater skill in facing hard issues as results of careful consensus building.

An agreement by consensus implies that every member abides by the group decision. Levels of enthusiasm may (and probably will) vary, but group members have many opportunities to express themselves before they freely decide they can *at least live with* the decision. It’s a good idea to remind folks that living with the decision means they will not save reservations until after the meeting and they will support decision implementation.

In consensus building discussions, therefore, silence has particular meaning. By choosing to remain silent, people express that they can *at least live with* the way discussions are going and they agree to support the decision. At the outset of meetings, it is wise to explain that choosing to remain silent implies this position.

Long before they reach agreement, folks should explore their differences. Groups I work with are often impatient to make decisions just when they need to get curious. What are the similarities and differences in perceptions, assumptions and judgments about what constitutes relevant data? There are many process tools that help to surface perceptions and assumptions. A consensogram, explained in the right column, is one.

As the group moves toward framing proposals, it needs to begin to test for consensus. If the issue is momentous and people have marked differences in viewpoints, it is a mistake to save consensus testing until late in the deliberations. Doing so puts the group at risk of backing into one decision-making moment when a proposal stands or falls. Yet often when I facilitate discussions, I find that groups shy away from testing for consensus, as if taking a straw poll, one of many ways to test for consensus, is voting once and for all.

Instead, the group needs to treat testing for consensus as one loop in a spiral. Folks declare where they stand so that the full group can hear people’s thinking. Once the group sees where people stand, it works together to frame or modify proposals or test for consensus on pre-planned contingencies. For example, if a straw poll shows deep disagreement on one option in a proposal, then you might switch to a second option to test for consensus on it. Many groups come to a place where they are spinning their wheels if they don’t surface everybody’s position on trial questions. By testing, then exploring people’s reasoning, then testing again, the group works step by step toward what the Quakers call “one spirit about a decision.”

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Consensograms Focus Group Thinking

Frame a question or questions in such a way that the responses can be rated on a scale, say, one to five or zero percent to one hundred percent. For example,

- To what degree are you committed to...?
- To what degree do you believe that this organization should...?
- Rate the degree of importance of this issue to us right now.

On a flipchart sheet, create a template for a bar graph, with the numbers of the scale written along the bottom. Each group member answers the consensogram question by placing one post-it note above the scale number of her/his answer. By looking at the bar graph of post-it “towers” on the scale, the whole group can see the spread of opinion.

Use a consensogram to identify areas where there is common ground and areas of disagreement that can be used to focus further discussion.

For reference

Sam Kaner’s *Facilitator’s Guide to Participatory Decision-Making* includes a section on reaching sustainable agreements.

(New Society Publishers, 1996)