

MEETINGS THAT ROCK!

By North Star Facilitators



The Complete (Abbreviated) Guide to Consensus ©



Handout 4



North Star Facilitators

Barbara J MacKay, MS, CPF[®]

(503) 579 5708

www.northstarfacilitators.com

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Introduction to This Competency

Facilitating Consensus



Consensus process at its best is both simple and complex at the same time and beautiful to watch unfold. In this module, I've consulted my favorite facilitator colleagues' ideas and added in my own experience in facilitating consensus 100's of times with groups from all over the world over the last 25+ years.

Often in your meetings, you need to help the group: 1) gain agreement or reach consensus on a decision or 2) resolve an issue where there appears to be many differing and confusing perspectives. What does consensus look like? Does everyone have to agree? This module helps us look at the classic facilitator's definition of consensus and tools we can apply in any meeting. Note: Consensus does not have to be difficult, 100% "airtight", or time-consuming.

What will we cover?

We will look at common definitions of consensus and help you come to your own insights and deeper understanding of consensus and how you can facilitate it. You will know when to strive for consensus, when the group is not ready for consensus and the five great tools to use when they are ready for different situations. These tools can be used with small groups or very large (i.e., n=100's) groups.

In this handout, you will have a chance to learn and/or practice:

- Definition – understanding consensus
- The difference between making a simple decision and gaining consensus
- A framework for understanding the steps to creating consensus.
- 5 consensus building techniques – from simple to more complex (Includes detailed instructions for each technique)
- Practice exercises using real scenarios for you to see how tools are used
- "Best in the market" books you may want to consult to further your journey to becoming a master consensus builder

In the Appendix, we include:

- FAQ's (Frequently Asked Questions)
- A fantastically helpful personal practice exercise
- Our suggested answers to the exercises

Understanding Consensus

“When we believe that human beings are motivated solely by pure self-interest, then it is difficult to imagine that consensus can occur. Consensus rests on the assumption that people can voluntarily back off from the aspects of a particular position in order that some aspects of their position can be satisfied in a group agreement.

In addition to whatever drive to self-interest we humans possess, there is also a drive to connect with other human beings.Consensus cannot occur were human beings not able to think and act beyond self-interest alone. The desire to connect is strong. It is the experience of feeling connected that positively motivates even those who are cynical and bitter to try one more time to work with a group of people who are serious about the same issues and concerns.”

-- R. Bruce Williams

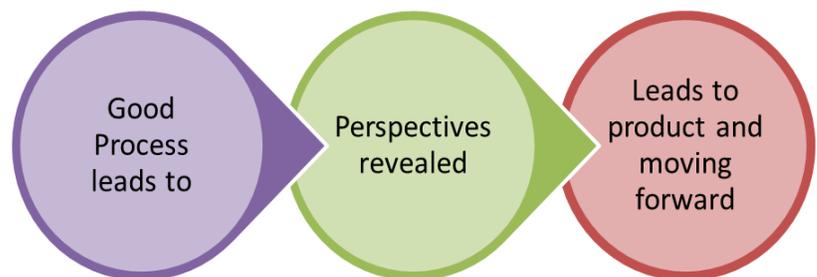
More Than 50 Ways to Build Team Consensus, Introduction, Page ix

Not all meetings need to build consensus but it is needed often enough to rank as one of the most important techniques or tools for facilitators. If you don't know what consensus is and how to get there, you will not be able to help in many group conversations. There are many methods for helping a group arrive at consensus. In this handout, we briefly speak of five consensus making techniques that range from simple to fairly complicated. This overview will help you conduct some simple ways to help a group attain consensus and build up your skills to take on more challenging methods. It is also very helpful to take a class in specific consensus methods (e.g., the Technology of Participation™ (ToP™) consensus workshop training offered throughout the world under various names).

Definition of Consensus

The word “consensus” comes from the Latin word “consentire” which means to think together. I would describe consensus as a process of talking and thinking deeply together that leads to a set of strategies or decisions that all agree are worth supporting.

It is important to understand that the **process of consensus-building is just as important as the products** of consensus. Often people will change their minds, broaden their perspective or achieve real understanding, compassion or empathy for others' positions and perspectives in the process of thoughtful dialogue. It is also about helping people move forward.



Exercise 1

Think of a time when you were part of a conversation where the group had a rich discussion, everyone participated and at the end, chose a “winning” set of solution(s) to their problem. Describe the process to get there (e.g., what was it like at beginning, in the middle and at end) and how you felt about being part of that group activity. It could be a family or community discussion if you cannot think of a professional work situation.

Beginning of process

Middle of Process

End of Process

How I felt about being part of this group activity...

All Facilitating is Really About Building Consensus

Besides being a useful choice for making high impact and enduring decisions, skilled facilitators are intentionally building consensus with almost everything they do.

The following are all examples of helpful contributions to consensus-building:

- Summarizing a complex set of ideas to the satisfaction of group members
- Getting everyone's input into a clear goal and objectives for the group's work
- Gaining buy-in from all members about the purpose of the session
- Linking people's ideas together so they notice they are saying the same thing
- Recording notes on flipchart, slide or using on-line software program that allows each member to see where and how they've contributed and be satisfied with what has been recorded
- Discussing and agreeing on which decision will best serve the needs of the group in a formal decision-making process

Since all facilitation activities strive to be collaborative, participative, synergistic and unifying, all facilitation activities are essentially consensus building in nature!

What Does Consensus Look Like? Characteristics of the Process

Regardless of whether consensus is being used formally to reach a decision on a specific issue, or informally as an ongoing facilitation technique, you know the group is working consensually if the following conditions are met:

- There are lots of ideas being shared
- No one is trying to push their own solution; instead there's an open and objective quest for solutions
- Discussion invites and supports both facts and feelings
- Every voice is heard multiple times in multiple ways (e.g., in large and small group, in writing and orally)
- There is active listening and paraphrasing to clarify ideas and ideas are added to by other members
- When the final solution is reached people feel satisfied that they were part of the decision
- Everyone feels consulted and involved enough that even though the final solution isn't the one they would have chosen working on their own, they can readily "live with it."

There are many situations where the decisions being made are so important that consensus is the only acceptable method of decision making. A few examples of these situations from my own

practice include the following:

- How to use funds raised by a parent advisory group in a school
- Decide on public policy stances and advocacy activities for next three years
- What elements to include in a request for proposal around energy efficiency in the region
- What is a mission statement that reflects the core passion?
- Articulating organizational values to share with stakeholders
- What key characteristics are needed in our new executive director position to ensure the survival of our organization?

In these cases, the group agrees to keep discussing until everyone indicates that they can live with the proposed outcome(s).

Don't Ask

"Do we all agree?" or "Is everyone happy?"

Instead Ask

"Have we got a well-thought-out solution that we all can live with and commit to implementing?"

-- Ingrid Bens

Facilitation at a Glance, pg. 97-99

Encouraging consensus as the approach is a wise strategy in situations where one or more individuals routinely dissent. When voting is used in these cases, the dissenters lose the vote and are then able to say that they weren't in agreement. This divides the group, allows dissenters to remain entrenched in their opinions and absolves them of responsibility for the outcomes decided by the group. Working toward consensus forces dissenters to collaborate.

Try NOT to end a consensus exercise by asking, "Is everyone happy?" or even, "Does everyone agree?" At the end of a great consensus process, people have usually made concessions, and are likely not getting everything they 'wanted'.

Tip:

If there are individuals in a group that routinely dissent, voting should be avoided in making decisions. Rather, use consensus to encourage dissenters to collaborate.



Consensus Versus a Simple Decision

So when do you NOT need to use a consensus building process? I would say the following situations would not consensus:

- Someone in authority has already predetermined the decision and simply wants buy-in (they may not really achieve buy-in in this case, but it seems like they think they can)
- The decision has to be made on an urgent basis. Severe consequences will result if the decision is not implemented very quickly
- It is a routine decision to be made – people expect and like the “usual” solution. This might be e.g., having a yearly review of standard procedures. It might simply mean taking a vote on making no changes.
- It is a very simple decision and does not require the effort and time of many people to make it.



“Group decision making and consensus building can produce meaningful, integrated, broadly supported solutions to exceedingly difficult problems. The key is to stay committed to a participatory process.”

Adapted from Sam Kaner, page 143, Facilitator’s Guide to Participatory Decision Making

Tip on Consensus Versus Decision

Facilitator colleague says of consensus....

“I like to explain to my groups that we need to know when we don't have consensus, but that a lack of consensus alone might not stop a decision.

I further explain that even if only one person does not agree with a decision, it probably means one of two things:

That person is aware of an issue that the rest of the group does not perceive.

or

The decision is not properly stated or sufficiently explained so that everyone can be comfortable with the decision's validity.

I tell them that, in the second case, we need to clean up the communication because we are sure to encounter the same objections with others. We need the perspectives of every member of the group; that's why we're working in a group.

I feel that some people are uncomfortable objecting to a decision that the rest of the group supports, because it can feel confrontational. If I do this right, I can take away that element.

I arrived at this practice in a part of my career when I was responsible for cleaning up after good decisions were explained badly, resulting in turmoil.”

Source: Mary Jackson from a facilitation group list serve many years ago



Ground Rules You Might Use When Using a Consensus Process

(Choose 3-5 of the phrases below)

- Everyone has wisdom
- We need everyone's ideas to get the wisest results
- There are no wrong answers
- Truth comes from multiple perspectives
- We will not push a decision forward at the expense of anyone here
- We will move forward together

Source: Adapted from Brian Stanfield, p. xviii, *The Workshop Book – From Individual Creativity to Group Action*, Institute of Cultural Affairs

Consensus Techniques

All consensus consists of several thinking modes to get to the final agreement. Bob Wiele who created the “Smart for Life” facilitator tools has developed a useful system to help one be very intentional about how to think. His framework I believe is useful to describe the generic thinking steps of a consensus process. He uses a traffic light system of colors (red, yellow, green) to describe overall thinking types and then each of the traffic lights has a warm and a cool thinking side to it. Essentially what he is telling us is that we can tap into different ways of thinking to be smart. Borrowing from his metaphor and model, I am proposing that we go through the following 3 processes to get to consensus regardless of which tool or technique we are using (see graphic next page). They are:

1 Building Understanding

The process of building understanding starts with everyone getting the same information – does everyone have the same and complete set of info? Wiele would talk about using our cool thinking abilities to 1) scan the situation; 2) structure information and 3) clarify understanding. However, he would also talk about the need to also use our warm thinking abilities to bring in the emotional side of understanding. These warm thinking strategies he describes as the ability to tune into feelings, empathize with others and help everyone express their feelings. So you can see there is already a lot of complexity and possibilities of using different mindsets and thinking strategies even in the first step to building consensus.

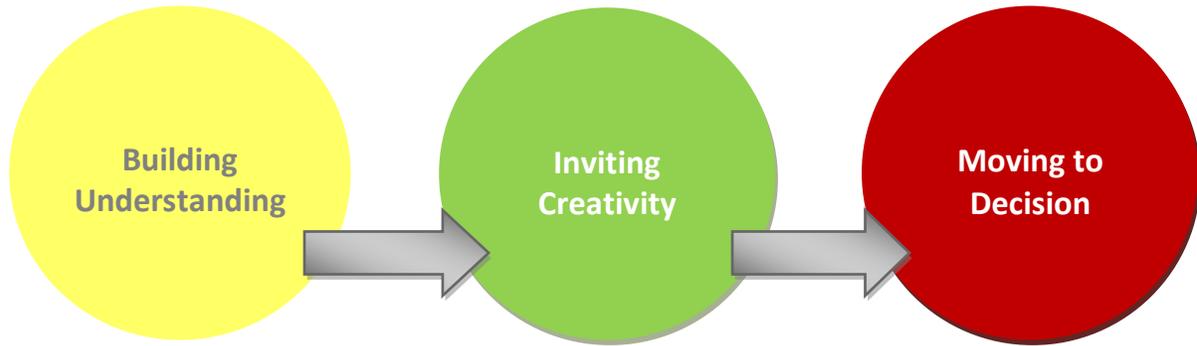
2 Inviting Creativity

Creative thinking can also involve both warm and cool thinking types centered. If you’re thinking more from the cool side of the mind, you can use one or more of the following: 1) brainstorming ideas; 2) challenging assumptions; 3) reframing ideas into opportunities and 4) envisioning possibilities. The warm aspect to inviting creativity that is based more on feelings or emotions includes 1) going with the flow and 2) creating opportunities for insight.

3 Moving to Decision

You are now at the converging part of consensus- building by helping the group narrow multiple ideas and perspectives into a shorter set of options or priorities. Decision-making in the group must involve both logical and emotional intelligences. Wiele describes the logical cool decision making strategies as 1) getting to the crux; 2) bringing things to conclusion; 3) validating the conclusion and 4) relying on experience. The heart (warm) aspect of decision making would be to 1) engaging the group in recognizing what values are driving their decision and 2) trusting their gut.

In summary, the 3 processes are depicted below. We are using Wiele’s color scheme of the traffic light system. In Step 1 we are slowing the group down, thus the yellow traffic light signal. In Step 2, we are encouraging the group to be free flowing and moving, thus the green traffic light signal. In Step 3 we are getting the group to stop and come to a conclusion because in this step, they have reached consensus on a course of action or decision. If you only remember these 3 steps to consensus building, you will be more effective as a facilitator.



The next section discusses 5 techniques used in helping a group reach consensus and shows which process of building consensus they include:

1. Five Finger Consensus
2. Converge
3. Consensus Decision-Making
4. Flipchart Consensus Workshop Method
5. ToP™ Consensus Workshop Method

Tool	Building Understanding	Inviting Creativity	Moving to Decision
Five Finger Consensus			
Converge			
Consensus Decision Making			
Flipchart Consensus Workshop Method			
The ToP Consensus Workshop Method			

Five Finger Consensus



This technique is really only about the 3rd step of Moving to Decision. It assumes Steps 1 (Building Understanding) and 2 (Inviting Creativity) have already taken place using any techniques you wish.

This method achieves consensus-based decision making without resulting in watered-down decisions. It is often appropriate with cross-functional teams and community groups in which there is a wide variety of interests and the desire for full consensus can potential erode the quality of the decision (Wilkinson, 2004).

With five-finger consensus, once an alternative is proposed and discussed and the group is ready to check for agreement, the facilitator explains that on the count of three, each person should hold up between one and five fingers indicating the level of support for the recommendation on the table:



- 5: Strongly agree
- 4: Agree
- 3: Can see pluses and minuses, but willing to go along with the group
- 2: Disagree
- 1: Strongly disagree and can't support

If everyone shows a 5, 4, or 3, consensus has been reached, and we can move ahead. If there are any 1s or 2s, there is further discussion, and the originator of the alternative has the option to make adjustments to the alternative.

Then the facilitator tests five-finger consensus again. If everyone shows a 5, 4, 3, or 2, the decision is made, and we move ahead. If there are any 1s, there is further discussion, and the originator of the alternative again has the option to make adjustments to the alternative. In the final review, majority rules. The decision is made based on the majority of the participants. This can be repeated for other alternatives or proposals, if applicable.

Exercise 2

Below list possible alternative fun props (i.e., besides everyone's fingers! 😊) that you would need to facilitate a 5 finger consensus activity. See our suggestions in the appendix.

Converge



Moving to Decision

This process of converging¹ seeks to reach consensus through a “least change” method. When there are many parties involved and agreement from all parties is required to move forward, the converge technique can address a situation in which a small number of people are not in agreement with the majority (Leadership Strategies, 2003)

In this method, the facilitator asks each person not in agreement, “What is the least amount of change we could make to the most favored alternative for it to be acceptable to you?” Of course, some changes may cause others to disagree with the alternative. The facilitator continues to ask the question, and changes continue to be made until the group converges on a solution that all parties are willing to accept.

Exercise 3

What alternative phrases/approaches would you use to neutrally acknowledge the people who are not in agreement? See our suggestions in the appendix.

¹ The IAF Handbook of Group Facilitation, Chapter 22, Page 378-379, By Michael Wilkinson

Consensus Decision Making

Consensus is group decision making at its purest. It means arriving at a decision each member of the group can accept and support. The decision may not be everyone's first choice. It may not even be anyone's first choice, but it's a decision everyone can live with.

Good consensus decision making takes conscious effort and practice. Understanding group process and effective communication skills helps enormously.

Steps for Reaching a Consensus-Based Decision



Building Understanding

Step 1 - Clearly define the issue. You might write a statement that describes the decision to be made.

Step 2 - Discuss the issue. Put all ideas on the table; focus on interests, not positions. Put forward all ideas without criticism, and discuss each of the ideas, considering pros and cons. Use decision-making techniques such as prioritization and multi-voting to aid the process. Hint: you might find it useful to discuss any assumptions around the decision or topic such as who will be impacted, the costs associated with it, etc.



Moving to Decision

Step 3 - Test for consensus. Can each group member live with the decision? If not, go back and tweak the decision to everyone's agreement. Or, take a break and come back to the issue when people have time to think things over.

Step 4 - Make the decision. Write it up and communicate it to all those impacted.

Reminders When Using Consensus

Allow sufficient time for active discussion and participation by all team members. Maintain an open mind, and demonstrate skills in providing feedback, listening, and conflict resolution.

Use a visual sign, such as “thumbs up” (or any other culturally acceptable action, for example, head nodding or raising a hand), to clearly demonstrate group member’ preference on the issue. See other techniques below to assist you.

You might also add in other steps such as clearly identifying the desired end result; creating group norms for the situation; creating a plan of action to communicate the decision; and setting up a progress report or times to check in on how well the decision is being implemented.

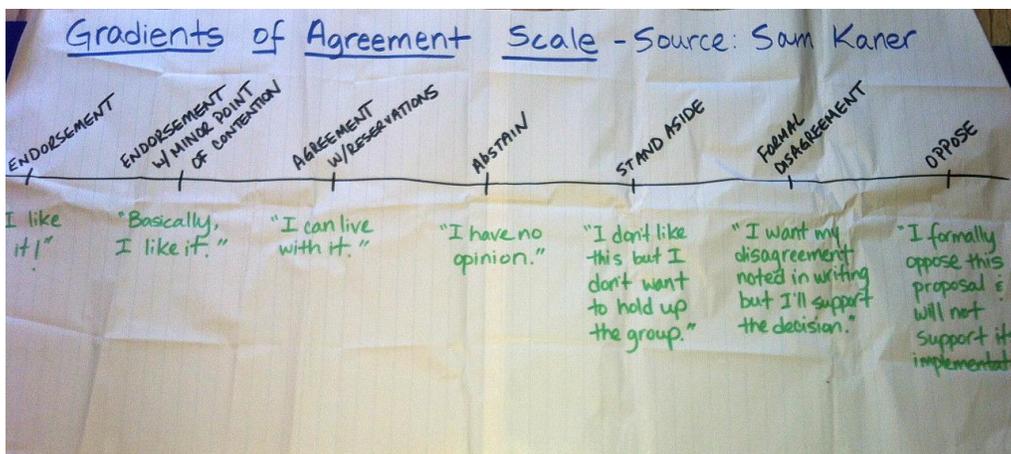
Source: The IAF Handbook of Group Facilitation, Chapter 19, Page 325, By Fred Niziol & Kathy Free & Ingrid Bens “Facilitating with Ease” Pages 98-103

Bonus!

You might try also using the gradients of agreement scale when you use this process (developed by Sam Kaner—see resources page).

You can have people place their level of agreement on a chart as depicted in the photo below. Indicate any of these levels (this gives the whole group a quick read on where the group is.) If anyone has marked “x’s” on the right side of the chart (i.e., levels 6-7 below) ask them: “What is the issue for you?” and “What changes to the proposed solution would make it more agreeable to you?” You do this for every person who is not happy with the proposal (i.e., anyone who marked an x at point 6 or 7) until you reach consensus.

- **Endorsement** – I like it
- **Endorsement with minor point of contention** – basically I like it
- **Agreement with reservations** – I can live with it
- **Abstain** – I have no opinion
- **Stand aside** – I don’t like this but don’t want to hold up the group
- **Formal disagreement** - I want my disagreement noted in writing but I’ll support the decision
- **Oppose** – I formally oppose this proposal and will not support its implementation



Exercise 4

Below are three scenarios that a facilitator might encounter. Check off which one of these scenarios would warrant using the above consensus decision making technique:

- A. A science and technology museum staff wants to decide whether to focus their exhibits on a specific age range. Currently, they try to cater to the full spectrum (i.e. 3 years – 90 years). They have recently lost a lot of clientele from the older (i.e. 45+ years) generation.
- B. Board and staff are at a retreat. They have a draft version of their mission statement and they want to decide whether it is ready to be ratified.
- C. Parents on a school advisory council are trying to decide how to allocate the \$3,000 they have raised in funds. They have 3 chosen options and are not in agreement which option is best.

See our “answers” (we may not be right 😊) on the last page of this handout/appendix.

REMEMBER!

Consensus isn't designed to make people happy or leave them in 100% agreement. Its goal is to create an outcome that represents the best feasible course of action given the circumstances and allow the group to move from “stuck” to moving forward.



Flipchart Consensus Workshop Method

Use the Flipchart Consensus Workshop Method when you have a group of less than 10 people. This method is not meant to arrive at a decision but rather help the group understand where they have elements of agreement. For example, they may wish to explore strategies to solve a problem, improve a process or program, or build a purpose statement. Start with a central question that everyone agrees is worth spending some time on. You'll need 2 pieces of flipchart paper and some different colored markers. See example photo below. Allow minimum of 20-30 minutes to complete this process.



Building Understanding

Step 1 - Ensure that everyone understands and agrees to the central question that needs to be answered. See Tool 5 on page 17 for more details (3 minutes or less).



Inviting Creativity

Step 2 - Allow people about 3-5 minutes to do their own thinking on the question and write down their ideas on a scrap piece of paper –

Step 3 - Ask each person to choose two or three best ideas. (1 minute)

Step 4 - Ask each person to share their two to three ideas without interruption. (Even if similar to others encourage them to say at least two ideas). Record them on a flipchart - number them. (10 minutes)

Step 5 - After everyone has shared ideas, (you may have up to twenty ideas) decide where there are similar PAIRS of ideas. (e.g., number 3 and 16 might be similar in intent). Code similar ideas with a color or symbol. Once you have all pairs you can add to the pairs. Keep going through all ideas until you have grouped all ideas in about 5 categories. (10 minutes)



Moving to Decision

Step 6 - Read out the ideas from grouping with largest number of ideas and ask, "What name or title holds all of these ideas together that would answer our focus question?" When you have a name that everyone is reasonably happy with, go to the next grouping until all groups are named. (10 minutes) Rank these ideas according to your criteria for solution (if developed).or use dot voting to decide which ones to start with. Build a short three part action plan: What – who – when.

Even Simpler

- Let people think by themselves about the question.
- Share ideas and record them on a flipchart.
- Ask someone to sum up the ideas. Discuss this summary as a whole group.
- Decide on the 3 to 5 most important strategies or directions the brainstorming data are suggesting.
- Rank these ideas according to your criteria for solution (if developed).



Tip:

Be creative – try mixing and matching these techniques. Make up your own consensus process based on the four tools/methods outlined above.



The ToP[®] Consensus Workshop Method

The CONSENSUS WORKSHOP METHOD² is a way to come to consensus in a short period of time through a collective integrated thinking process. It can be achieved in about 1.5 hours using the full method or 0.5 hours using the flipchart method. This method includes all three steps of consensus building.

Here are the steps in brief one uses to facilitate the ToP[®] Consensus Workshop Method. Please see the next 2 pages for detailed instructions :

1. Formulate focus question. See next page for details.
2. Facilitate a number of “warm up” questions (See Module 3 for dialogue techniques)
3. Individual brainstorm. See page 18 for details
4. Small groups share ideas and submit a manageable number of ideas
5. Post and cluster ideas on a wall.
6. Name the clusters in a way that answers the focus question
7. Facilitate a reflective dialogue on insights and next steps.



Building Understanding

Step 1 - Formulate focus question. Always start with a great focus question. What is a great focus question? An open-ended question used in a brainstorming session, which draws out many different specific responses from each member of the group

What does the focus question do?

- flushes out hidden agendas
- gets all ideas out
- promotes dialogue

² ToP[®] stands for Technology of Participation. It is an approach consisting of many facilitator tools and theory that was formulated over many decades by an organization now called The Institute of Cultural Affairs. There are over 40 offices located throughout the world. There are also many organizations who use the methods that are affiliated with ICA but do not call themselves and ICA office. Two North American offices are www.ica-associates.ca and www.ica-usa.org.

- relays assumptions: there are no wrong answers; everyone has valid experiences

What does a good focus question include?

- names the subject
- identifies who it includes
- identifies the time frame
- is open-ended (draws out more than a yes or no response)
- draws out many different responses from participants.

Step 2 - Facilitate a number of “warm up” questions. Possible questions could include (pick and choose – make up ones according to situation):

- What do we know about this situation/ problem?
- What have we heard others say about this situation?
- What are the pluses and minuses of this current situation?
- What are the key reasons this situation exists?
- What do we know about how others have handled this situation?
- What have we tried before? What has worked? Not worked?
- What would be a really good outcome for this situation?
- What are some initial thoughts we have to resolve this situation?



Inviting Creativity

Step 3 - Individual brainstorm

- Give individual brainstorming time (3 - 5 minutes)
- Give each person time to brainstorm their own responses to the question on a sheet of paper. At the end of 3-5 minutes, ask each person to choose two or three best ideas and mark them with an asterisk *.
- Break larger group into smaller groups (e.g., threes) to share ideas (10 - 20 minutes)

Step 4 - Small groups share ideas and submit a manageable number of ideas

- In groups of 3-4, have each person take turns sharing their best ideas. Ask the group to come up with a total of 5- 10 different ideas.
- Tell the group they do not need to agree on all the ideas. They simply need to agree which 5-10 ideas they will submit to the larger group. Note: you need at least 25 to 35 ideas to make this process work well. (If you have ten people in the meeting, divide them into three groups. Ask each group to come up with 8-10 ideas per small group).
- Have the group transfer their ideas onto 5"x7" file cards. Have them write one idea per card in large bold letters. Each idea should answer the focus question.
- Have them put small bit of "Hold-it" on center top back of each card.



Moving to Decision

Step 5 - Post ideas in batches of 12-15 on a wall

- Ask the group to give you its cards as you request them (20-30 minutes)
- Ask first for their clearest ideas (those which will likely need no explanation to the rest of the group).
- Place them in a straight line on wall using hold-it or masking tape. Step back from cards and ask "where do you see pairs of ideas that are similar in intent?" Cluster ideas under coded cards as they are paired off. Those cards, which are not paired, can remain as singles for now.
- Then ask for their best ideas of those which are left. Cluster as before. Finally ask them to code the rest of cards not handed in, and give them to you to add to existing clusters. When all the cards are clustered under coded titles, move to the next step.
- Title the clusters (15 - 25 minutes)

Step 6 - Name the clusters in a way that answers the focus question

- Start with the longest cluster and read out all the idea under that cluster.
- Ask the group to create a 3-7 word phrase that answers the focus question and captures the essence of all the ideas in that cluster.
- Print their title neatly on a colored file card.
- Continue this process until all of the clusters are named. Alternatively, you can assign one to two clusters to diads or triads to name and report back titles to whole group for clarification and approval.

Step 7 - Facilitate a reflective dialogue on insights and next steps

- Close the workshop (5- 15 minutes)
- Read the focus question and the answers to the question (titles of clusters). Thank- the group for their hard work and decide as a group how to prioritize these ideas (if appropriate and necessary). Decide on next steps to implement ideas.

Exercise 5

List some typical “focus” (open-ended) questions you might use with the ToP[®] consensus workshop method. We’ve started your list with 3 examples:

1. What are all the ways we might minimize the risks of doing this project?
2. What do we want to see happening with our organization or team in 3-5 years to ensure we stay vibrant and growing?
3. How can we ensure optimal customer service while we are changing software systems?

Conclusion

Consensus is used in almost every facilitated event in some form or another. In this interactive module, we have shared the thinking of many authors and added in real experiences from our own practice.

Author Brian Stanfield says consensus is often misunderstood. It does not mean everyone has to agree with every detail. It simply means there is enough agreement that the group moves from an impasse or indecision to a result that allows the group to move forward to the next step.

Consensus should be used when there are important decisions to be made or an agreed upon set of strategies is needed to create a plan of action. Using consensus processes with ample discussion is key to a result being accepted and easily implemented. Without this, many decisions and products of meetings are not ever implemented or even actively sabotaged.

It is wise to know the basic framework for arriving at consensus – in our case we used Wiele’s metaphor of the traffic lights – building understanding – generating creativity and then moving to decision. How you do that is where you as the facilitator get to be very creative. You can choose different tools for each aspect of the process, use different questions and even different visuals and props for each process. Have fun and be rigorous when you build consensus in a group. Done well, you can generate tremendous momentum and trust in the group and with you. Done poorly, it can derail a group, leave them discouraged and leave them feeling you are unskilled and untrustworthy. In short, learn to do it well, as consensus building is one of your most important facilitator tools.



Our Favorite “Best on the Market” Resources

(Other than those noted in this module)



“The Art of Facilitation”, Dale Hunter, et al, 1992.

“Creating a Culture of Collaboration”, IAF, 2006.

“Facilitating with Ease!”, Ingrid Bens, 2005.

“Facilitator’s Guide to Participatory Decision-Making”, Sam Kaner, et al, 2007.

“The Handbook for Working with Difficult Groups”, IAF, 2010.

“The IAF Handbook of Group Facilitation”, IAF, 2005.

“Large Group Interventions”, Barbara Benedict Bunker & Billie Alban, 1997.

“The 9 Disciplines of a Facilitator”, Jon C. Jenkins & Maureen R. Jenkins, 2006.

“The Workshop Book – From Individual Creativity to Group Action”, R. Brian Stanfield, 2002.



Your Guide and Author of This Module:

Barbara MacKay

Barbara MacKay, MS, CPF©, principal of North Star Facilitators, specializes in strategic planning, facilitation processes, training, and consulting.

Barbara is currently mentoring facilitators from all over the world and cares deeply about passing on the skills to others so the world becomes a just, peaceful and creative place. Barbara's strong interpersonal communication skills and experience allow her to work skillfully with a wide variety of participant perspectives. Barbara specializes in helping groups participate, problem-solve, plan and make progress in challenging and complex situations. She has an energetic, respectful style and clear delivery. Barbara has worked with 100's of clients from all sectors with her own company since 1995. She provided social, economic and environmental consulting and facilitation services with many cultures throughout Canada from 1981 to 1995.

Barbara is a: Certified facilitator and USA trainer with the International Institute of Cultural Affairs (ICA and Canada); Certified Professional Facilitator (CPF) and assessor of other facilitators worldwide with the International Association of Facilitators (IAF); Professional Development Strategic Initiative Coordinator for the IAF for four years; has been an Adjunct professor with University of Oregon (Eugene) (teaching the only required facilitation skills (4 credits) class of all Oregon universities at graduate level in Conflict and Dispute Resolution Studies); an adjunct professor teaching facilitation skills at Portland State University (Not for Profit Management Institute); certified OneSmartWorld™ trainer; trained in Disaster Crisis Intervention for facilitators; certified accelerated learning trainer; trained extensively in: Constructivist Listening and Cross Cultural Communication and Alliance Building; visioning processes; Mind Mapping™; Behavior styles model "Why Are You Like That?™"; and Herrmann Brain Dominance Instrument (HBDI). She is also trained and teaches about Learning Organizations; Organizational Journey (ICA); conciliation; "shifting from positions to interests"; conflict resolution; negotiation skills; anger management; risk communication; training for trainers; and curriculum development.



www.Facebook.com/NorthStarFacilitators



www.linkedin.com/in/BarbaraMacKay



www.twitter.com/BarbaraJMacKay

Appendix



FAQs (Frequently Asked Questions) About Consensus

Note: Some of my answers will simply refer back to what you covered in this handout and thus are short!

When...

Q: How long does it take to build consensus?

A: I've seen groups come to consensus in time frames as short as an hour or two over challenging topics. The simpler techniques (5-finger technique; thumbs up, sideways or down) are more to show the group it already has high levels of consensus and may only take a few minutes. If the group is struggling a lot, it may make sense to give the group days or weeks of time between sessions and get resolution only finally occurs after several weeks or months.

Q: When is consensus not needed or advised?

A: I would say do not use consensus based processes when the following conditions exist:

- *People don't have enough information based on the people present in the room to intelligently discuss and arrive at agreement*
- *There is a lot of conflict present around the issue*
- *What is needed is a hierarchal decision so it's not realistic for the group to provide input to the solution. (e.g., a crisis situation)*
- *The people in the room do not believe their input will be valued or used.*
- *The solution is easy and straightforward and there is really only one way to proceed (Be careful though because it may seem like that on the surface but if you ask enough people who will be affected by the strategy or decision, this "appearance of only one way to proceed might not be true.*

What...

Q: What is the difference between making a decision and building consensus?

A: Sometimes they are the same thing. However, sometimes the decision is not based on gaining group agreement or generating anything new or creative. It's simply a straightforward "easier" decision such what to serve for lunch at a meeting. 😊.It could also be a go/no go decision (i.e., do not proceed or proceed with a project, program, policy etc.) and at this point, consensus might NOT work as well as applying a majority vote technique.

Who...

Q: How many people are needed to form consensus

A: *Sorry to be vague – ☺ It depends on the issue and how many people are impacted and/or part of the implementation team. For the five finger method, likely no more than 30 people. For the ToP method, I've done this with hundreds of people. It can be organized with simultaneous groups answering the same question and then each group's data is merged to provide the overall group consensus.*

Q: Which people in a group are needed to build consensus?

A: *Typically involve anyone who could veto or negatively influence the group consensus later. Also invite anyone who might be involved in implementing the decision/ strategy/ action.*

How...

Q: How do I know I've got consensus?

A: *Usually people seem excited, pleased, relieved when the group achieves consensus. Sometimes you can literally have them mark their levels of agreement by using Sam Kaner's "gradients of agreement" tool or dot voting. See module on consensus and decision-making.*

What if.....

Q: My client says they don't need consensus for an upcoming important decision but I fear they may not get good follow through results without it. What do I do?

A: *I might ask them some or all of the following questions and then let them decide:*

- *What is the decision you are seeking?*
 - *When do you need the decision to be made?*
 - *Who will be impacted by it?*
 - *What are your own concerns about using a consensus process?*
 - *What have been the results in the past of having the decision come from the top? (or whatever they are suggesting)*
 - *Who will be early adopters of a decision made the way you propose?*
 - *Who will be late or reluctant adopters?*
 - *How will this impact the organization/team/project?*
- *Given your answers, which of consensus or telling them your decision will work best for you?*

If you are still nervous or feel your own sense of integrity or ethics is challenged (see module on values and ethics) after hearing their answers, consider telling them that you are probably not the best person to help them.

Personal Practice Suggestion

Practice on your life: Individual Consensus Workshop Instructions

(See photo on next page of what the final product may look like)

Step 1: What is my focus question?

Examples: (adapt or create your own)

1. What are the issues I face in achieving the best possible outcomes for myself in this (study/work) program?
2. How can I create more quality time for myself (or my family?)
3. What are all the things I want to do during my vacation? (Note: more of an organizing question rather than consensus building)
4. How can I make my work (or study space) more effective and appealing?
5. What are all the things I need to know to make this decision about my career?

Step 2: Brainstorm at least 15 ideas – one on each post-it note. Example below to question option #3

Ride my bike in the hills!



Step 4: Review data by laying out all the post-its in front of you. (if you have 20+, lay out half at a time to not be overwhelmed by too many ideas at once. Look for similar pairs of ideas that point to a similar approach, activity. Put the pairs together.

Step 5: Add similar ideas to existing pairs. Develop clusters or columns of ideas. Do this until all the ideas are matched up with at least one other idea. Discern focus of each cluster or column.

Step 6: Explore the clusters or columns of ideas for new insights. What are they really about? E.g., Daily Physical Movement Outdoors... Name each cluster on a new post-it using the same grammatical format for each name. Put a border around the name or use a different color of post-it to distinguish it from your brainstorming ideas. We call these the titles of all the similar ideas.

Daily Physical
Movement Outdoors

Step 7: Organize columns on a piece of paper with longest one to left and shortest one to the right. Ask yourself: What has become clear to me? What new insights do I have? What decisions or actions need to be taken to take this set of strategies or ideas to the next step?

Step 8: Type up your Word or excel chart with all your titles and corresponding ideas and write a half page describing what you learned in doing this process and insights about yourself and how you process information.



Our Suggested Answers to Module Exercises

Exercise 2

Below is our starter list of possible alternative fun props when using the five finger consensus method (i.e., besides everyone's fingers!)

Try making color coded cards – yellow, green and red – and distribute them when it comes to sharing your “opinion” on the decision or proposal - yellow cards means – I need more clarification; green cards mean – I am good with this decision ; red – means I cannot live with this decision.

Use numbered cards 1-5 and people hold up their number when go to vote

Have a flipchart visual explaining what each number means so people are not confused as to how many fingers to put up

Exercise 3

What alternative phrases/approaches would you use to neutrally acknowledge the people who are not in agreement?

- I heard you are unsure about this. Can you explain more about your thinking?
- Can you “unpack” your decision on this for us? i.e., Explain how you arrived at this conclusion
- What pieces of this are most challenging for you?
- How difficult is this decision for you. What is going on for you right now?

Exercise 4

We think consensus decision – making would work well for scenario A and C because they are serious issues which will impact a lot of stakeholders and it would be important to have full buy-in to the final solution.

The five finger consensus technique seems better suited to use for Scenario B.