

The Iambrown Consensus Process Flow Chart

Autumn Brown

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Consensus Process is...purposeful engagement in making decisions together in a way that is inclusive and non-hierarchical. It is a creative process which synthesizes the ideas of all members of a group towards a decision that suits the needs of the group, and the comfort level of the individual members.

Why Consensus? Decisions made by consensus are meaningful, holistic, and easier to carry forward than decisions made by voting and authoritarian decision-making processes. This is because all voices are heard in the process, and all members participating in the decision are invested in a successful outcome.

Here's how it works

Introduce the Issue

Gather and Share all relevant information.



Clarify the Issue and Context

What are the key questions? Is this the right time and place to discuss the issue? Do we have enough information to make a decision?



Explore and Discuss the Issue

Look at the diversity of ideas and possible solutions, noting areas of agreement and disagreement.



Synthesis a Proposal

Try to incorporate all viewpoints.



Discuss and Amend the proposal

Discuss the strengths and drawbacks. Identify and request friendly amendments, identify unfriendly amendments and potential blocks.



Test for Consensus; Decision and Re-Statement

Before asking if everyone is agreed, ask if there are any **stand-asides** (individuals who do not fully support the decision, but will not stand in the way of it moving forward). Then ask if there are any **blocks** (people who feel that the decision compromises the integrity of the group in terms of its purpose, goals, and values and will prevent the decision from moving forward). If there are no blocks, ask if everyone is **agreed**.



Implement the Decision

Once everyone is agreed, discuss how the decision will be carried forward and assign roles.

Modifications

For Committee: Many groups opt to develop proposals in committee. If this is the case, I recommend completing steps 1–3 with the large group, sending the issue to committee for step 4, and bringing the proposal back to the group for steps 5–7.

For Majority Decision: For some groups, coming to a complete and unified consensus is not necessarily feasible. These groups modify what it means to take decision. Consensus Minus One, for instance, means that if only one person blocks a decision, then the decision stands. In these situations, at least two people must block in order to stop a decision from moving forward. Other modifications include 90% majority rule or 2/3 majority rule.

What if there is a Block?

Consider your Options:

- Ask the person blocking if he/she is willing to stand aside.
- Return to discussion of the issue and develop a new proposal with the block in mind.
- Leave the proposal/discussion for another time; take a break for reflection.
- Accept the block and do not move forward.
- Use mediation tools or an outside mediator; develop a reconciliation committee to address frequent blocking, if necessary.
- Resort to other modes of decision-making, such as random choice or voting.

Consensus Process Tools

Here are a few tools that are useful in facilitating consensus process, and move the discussion forward in ways that are creative and productive.

Facilitation

Consensus Process works best when one or two individuals in the group facilitate the process, and help guide the group through each stage towards making a decision.

Small Groups

When working with a large group, it is often useful to break down into smaller groups as a way of allowing more voices to be heard and more creative ideas to surface.

Hand Signals

In a large group, the use of hand signals can indicate one's desire to speak, acknowledge a point of information, or communicate silent agreement, among other things. This is an effective way of easing communication and maintaining momentum without allowing for disruption or disrespect between parties.

Brainstorm/Go-Round/Popcorn

These are easy ways to get a lot of ideas out in the open relatively quickly.

- In a *Go-Round*...the facilitator asks a question and each member of a group answers in order, without responding to one another.
- In a *Brainstorm*...individuals can respond to and build off of each others ideas.
- In a *Popcorn*...the facilitator asks for ideas and everyone in the group is free to respond with whatever comes to mind without any particular order.

Talking Stick

Talking Sticks are wonderful for equalizing airtime and preventing interruption. The group selects an object to represent a Talking Stick, and once someone in the group is holding it, only he/she can talk.

Active & Reflective Listening

Active & Reflective Listening involves listening carefully to what another person is saying, and repeating back to him/her what you have heard, not what you think about what you heard. The idea is to help the other person achieve more clarity about his/her feelings on a particular issue.

Fishbowl

Fishbowls operate by drawing out a few members of a group to discuss an issue, while the larger group watches from a surrounding circle

Pros & Cons

Sometimes it is extremely clarifying for a group to make a list of the Pros & Cons of a specific decision.

Straw Poll

A Straw Poll is a fake vote. It is as simple as the facilitator asking who is for a decision, and who is against it. It can be very helpful in assessing how invested a group is in a specific decision or action.

Switching Roles

During particularly heated or contentious discussions, it can be helpful and clarifying to have individuals who feel very strongly on an issue switch roles, and argue for the opposite side.

Resources

- www.treegroup.info — The website of Tree Bressen, Consensus Trainer and Facilitator
- www.seedsforchange.org.uk/free/res — A web resource about Consensus and Facilitation
- www.iifac.com – The International Institute for Facilitation and Change
- www.pioneer.net/~alpha/ai-info.html — The website of the Alpha Institute

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