

# FreeGeek Columbus Consensus Handbook

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## Introduction

Consensus is a form of cooperative, non-coercive decision-making. Though simple to describe, this process usually requires great understanding and a fair bit of experience to practice well. Briefly, a group of people gathers together, raises an issue, discusses it, poses various solutions, and then chooses the decision that best satisfies the group. Individual preferences and concerns are considered, but the decision is for the group and so must satisfy the group as best it can — not any individual.

If a group uses consensus well, it actively demonstrates:

- It is possible to work cooperatively
- There are win-win solutions to problems
- It is possible for people with diverse ideas to find a common ground
- We can solve our problems without experts or coercive leaders

In a group that wants to work together, some satisfactory decision can be devised at the first meeting. When this does not happen, the meeting process is often deficient. Then the process must be changed so the group can re-establish the cooperative atmosphere necessary for productive behavior.

Much of the “consensus” currently practiced by groups contains a great deal of poor process. Be wary of poor implementation: make sure the process is cooperative, empowering, and egalitarian. If it is not, change it!

This handbook has been compiled as a “fall-back” resource - something the Community Council or the various working groups can use when process has broken down. Until that situation develops, there is no need to rigidly follow the procedures described.

## Why Consensus?

### ***Robust Decision-Making***

- Better decisions, more creative solutions
- Incorporates the best thinking of everyone – addresses more concerns and brings forth more fresh ideas
- Everyone is involved in the final decision and understands it better, so everyone is more likely to work to implement it
- More thorough discussion often results in shorter implementation time with less conflict later on.

### ***Democracy***

- Consensus can give us a stronger form of democracy in which decisions are evaluated based on their results, may be criticized by all whom they affect, and can always be re-evaluated and changed
- Everyone has an equal chance to participate.

## ***Cooperation***

- Encourages cooperation rather than competition
- Emphasis on helping everyone reach their highest potential, rather than knocking down opponents.

## ***Collectivism***

- Each participant agrees to abide by decisions, no matter whether that person is in the majority, in the minority, or is a lone voice
- Ideas belong to the group rather than to any individual
- Democracy and group unity are inspiring and encourage everyone to work harder for the group.

## ***Respect and Appreciation***

- Everyone's perspective is valued
- No one dominates anyone else
- No one feels oppressed or imposed upon by anyone
- Nonviolent
- The group becomes a safe place for every person to truly express themselves. This helps prevent misunderstandings and tension and allows everyone to think fully
- The skills necessary for good consensus are also necessary for good relationships with others.

## **How it Works**

### ***The Consensus Process***

Consensus is an adaptive process that can take many forms depending on the group and the issues or problems that are being discussed. In general, however, the consensus process takes a form similar to this:

1. Raise an issue or problem
2. Clarify the issue or problem and put it into context
3. Discuss the issue
  - a) Bring out a diversity of ideas, concerns and perspectives
  - b) Encourage heartfelt dissent and challenge
  - c) Consider possible solutions and problems with those solutions
  - d) Note agreements and disagreements and the underlying reasons
  - e) Synthesize proposed ideas/solutions or come up with totally new ideas in the supportive atmosphere of the meeting (find a “third way”)

4. Evaluate the different ideas until one idea seems right for the group. Make sure there are no loose ends
5. The scribe reads what he or she has integrated and summarized of the “one” idea around which consensus is forming
6. Check that no one objects to the “idea.” If no one objects, then consensus has been achieved. If there are objections, continue discussion until all of the concerns have been resolved.

### ***Possible Outcomes of the Consensus Process***

Following are some potential outcomes to the consensus process:

- Consensus occurs
- Some agree to “stand aside” with or without their concerns recorded in the notes
- The group consents to let one person or a committee decide for the group (most often by delegating to a working committee)
- Defer decision until a later time
- Drop the discussion forever and go on to other things
- All agree to disagree and go separate ways — perhaps even leave or disband the group.

The ideal outcome is consensus. Consensus about a decision is usually indicated by the following conditions:

- General support for the decision and no strong objections
- The merits of the decision outweigh the problems
- There is sufficient excitement in the group to go for it
- The decision feels right — it feels like the true emergence of an integrated group will.

### ***What is Not Consensus***

Because many readers may be unfamiliar with consensus, it is useful to help define what consensus is by giving examples of what it is not. Consensus does not allow for the following:

- Voting
  - Voting is a process in which people express their preferences — whether strongly heartfelt or weakly ephemeral
- Unanimity
  - Unanimity is a voting process in which 100% of the group votes the same way
- Giving In
  - If you disagree, then disagree — then decide together if your concerns are important enough to find another solution
- Bargaining

- Appeasement
- Finding the Least-Common-Denominator.

### ***Tips for Achieving Good Process***

- Ensure that everyone understands the decision that was made and why other decisions were not made instead
- Do not let the discussion get limited to one idea or proposal, or a debate about the pros and cons of a few options
- Do not gather proposals as quickly as possible and then try to choose among them
- Do not make a proposal and then try to modify it to fit people's concerns – let the proposal “bubble up” from discussion
- If necessary, write proposals out in advance to save time or accommodate geographically distributed participants
- Be particularly aware of shy people and their small voices
- Avoid arguing excessively for your own positions or ideas. Present your ideas as lucidly and clearly as possible, but listen to other member's reactions and consider them carefully before you press your point
- Do not assume that someone must win and someone must lose when a discussion reaches a stalemate. There may be a totally new idea (a “third way”) that encompasses everyone's views. Or, if you can't find such a solution, look for the next-most-acceptable alternative for everyone
- Do not change your mind simply to avoid conflict and to reach agreement and harmony. Be suspicious when agreement seems to come too quickly or easily. Explore the reasons for the easy acceptance and be sure everyone accepts the solution for basically similar reasons. Yield only to positions that make sense to you and really solve the problem
- Avoid conflict-reducing techniques such as majority vote, averages, coin-flips, and bargaining
- When dissenting members finally agree, don't feel they must be rewarded by having their own way on some later point
- The goal is to question an issue until a good solution is found — not to make everyone feel good by all agreeing
- Differences of opinion are natural and expected. Seek them out and try to involve everyone in the group's decision process. Disagreements can actually help the process — with a wide range of information and opinions, there is a greater chance that the group will hit upon more satisfying solutions
- Encourage thorough discussion and dissent. Every option has its limitations — determine what they are during the discussion rather than after you begin the activity
- Lay out all possible options and opinions without attribution to any individual (“Some people think this..., others think this..., and we could also do this..., though it has been pointed out that that option would lead to that...” )
- Don't take disagreements with your ideas as a personal attack — stay calm and centered —

relax, you are among friends.

## ***Identifying and Interrupting Poor Process***

The following are examples of poor consensus process:

- Grandstanding — repeatedly raising unimportant concerns, saying the same thing over and over, repeating what others have said, proposing the same idea repeatedly without hearing others' objections to it
- Obstructive blocking — refusing to allow a proposal to be considered without adamantly expressing your concerns or preferences; refusing to allow any ideas except your own to be considered
- Ramming or Bulldozing — imposing a proposal on others even though someone has already expressed an objection to it; moving too quickly to a decision or without the full input of everyone
  - Blocking is sometimes a response to ramming — your process has broken down.

When poor process occurs:

- Insist that decision-making cease until these poor processes change
- Acknowledge errors in process and attempt to correct them
- Seriously consider the concerns of those who are blocking. Incorporate these concerns or build a whole new decision
- Sometimes blocking and grandstanding are due to emotional hangups.
  - Assertively interrupt this behavior and honestly state its nature
  - Provide emotional support for the individuals, but demand that they change their behavior (nonviolent direct action)
  - If someone is consistently intransigent or disruptive, ask them to leave — they do not belong in a group that works cooperatively
- Sometimes blocking and grandstanding are due to ignorance about the consensus process
  - Spend some time explaining how consensus differs from other (more familiar) decision-making processes — consensus is not unanimous voting
- Irreconcilable differences — two factions have opposite perspectives and cannot agree
  - Realize there is a disagreement that won't change
    - Give the issue to a smaller group to work out the issues and submit a new (hopefully more acceptable) proposal
    - Table the issue for discussion at a future time. Allow people to think on it for a while
    - Drop the issue and don't discuss it further
    - Split the group and bid each other good luck in their ventures.

# Meetings

## *Tips for Good Meetings*

- Avoid long, boring meetings dominated by one or two people
- Ensure that each person participates
- Strive to educate people about the potential issues surrounding a decision
- Divide the meeting agenda into manageable chunks so that the group makes decisions and moves toward achieving its goals
- Help participants socialize enjoyably with each other and feel part of a community
- If meetings are too long or not enjoyable
  - Consider expanding the time for meeting evaluation — figure out what is wrong and fix it
  - Consider having a workshop on meeting process and spend the time to develop consensus, meeting, and problem solving skills.

## *Techniques for a Cooperative Meeting*

### Seating

- Sit in a circle so everyone can see each other, or semi-circle facing the visible notes.

### Inclusion

- Introductions
  - When there are newcomers, allow time for people to get to know each other
  - Try having people introduce themselves to just one other person and then introduce their partner to the group
    - Shy people can speak out better
    - Everyone gets to know one person well (a buddy)
    - Provides practice for listening and looking out for others
- Check- in
  - “Weather report” — how people are feeling (anxious, silly, tired)
  - Excitement sharing — something good that has happened recently
- Encourage cooperation
  - Use tension reducers
  - Create a safe space (prohibit personal attacks, affirm one another)
  - Build trust (be honest, follow through with your commitments)
- Take time to teach skills to newcomers so that they can participate effectively.

## Organizing Ideas

- Review the agenda
  - Shows what is scheduled, who will present information, type of item (announcement, report, discussion, or decision), and time allocated
  - Prevents important topics from being neglected or trivial ones from being given too much time
  - Prevents important decisions from being made at the end of a long meeting when people are tired and some may have left
- Generate Visible Notes (Group Memory)
  - A scribe might write main ideas on a large piece of paper taped to the wall
  - Focuses attention on the problem, not on other participants; ideas are de-coupled from the person who proposed them
  - All ideas are remembered, none lost
- Utilize idea mapping techniques
  - Brainstorming
    - Say every idea you have, record it on a wall chart
    - No negative comments or criticism of ideas
    - Let others' ideas stimulate new ones for you
    - Provides a way to get everyone's ideas out quickly and to generate new, fresh ideas
  - Criteria List
    - Make a list of important criteria the solution must satisfy
    - Check how each possible solution satisfies the criteria
  - Advantages/Disadvantages Chart
    - For each possible solution, list the advantages and disadvantages
    - Point out that no solution is perfect and none is completely bad — then choose the one with the most (or best) advantages and the fewest (or mildest) disadvantages.

## Discussion Facilitation Strategies

- Tips for facilitating discussion:
  - Leave a silent space between each speaker for people to really listen
    - Allows everyone the chance to ponder what has been said
    - Helps to “center” or “ground” everyone — interrupts the process when people start mindlessly rushing forward
    - Allows everyone to reflect on the issue, the group, and how they are trying to work together

- If some speak frequently, ask them to refrain — encourage those who seem excluded — if this is a real problem, give each person 5 pebbles and require they use a pebble each time they speak.
- There are many strategies for determining the order in which people will speak. Here are a few of them:
  - Facilitator may call on people in turn (“deli — take a number” or “stacking” method) — don’t stack up more than 4 or 5 people at a time
  - Each speaker calls on the next
  - Those who want to speak stand (or raise a hand), then begin to sit down until only one is left standing (perhaps the person with the most urgent statement or who has spoken least often); then this person speaks
  - Go Around the Circle
    - Let each person speak in turn as you go around the circle of the meeting
    - Gives everyone a chance to speak
    - Interrupts back-and-forth debates
    - Lets everyone in the group know what everyone else is thinking.
- Small Group Discussions
  - Make a large group manageable by breaking into small groups of 3-7
  - Provides everyone with a chance to speak and be heard in a non-intimidating atmosphere
  - Makes it possible for real discussion and debate of ideas to occur — poor ideas can be weeded out and good ones expanded so that only good, well-thought-through ideas need be presented to everyone.
  - There are many ways to break down into small groups, including:
    - Groups of random people (to generate ideas and discuss the merits of each idea )
    - Groups of like-minded people (to provide support and help put ideas into words or on paper )
    - Groups of people with differences (to work through their objections).
  - When finished with small group discussion, next steps might include:
    - Break into other small groups for further discussion
    - Report back the best ideas to the large group — then discuss in the large group or break into the same or different small groups for further discussion
    - Have a spokesperson from each group meet with other spokes to further refine the ideas generated while the rest of the group focuses on other issues — when the spokes come up with a solution, they then present this to the larger group for ratification or further discussion.
- Spokes-councils
  - Meta-groups made of representatives from smaller groups

- For use with large and/or geographically dispersed groups
- Spokes-councils allow the organization to only make decisions at the larger level that must be made at this level — decisions that only affect the small group should be made by the small group — often all you need to do is tell other groups what your group is doing
- Each small group selects one person (maybe 2) to be their spokesperson or “spoke”
  - This person carries the group’s opinions, concerns, and suggested solutions to a “spokes-council”
  - The ideas taken to the spokes-council should be the same regardless of who the spoke is — the spoke serves the small group and is responsible to adequately represent the group and the group opinion (not her own)
  - If every small group has discussed the issue thoroughly and the spoke knows the group well, then the spokes-council can come up with new solutions to meet every concern brought to it — each spoke knows whether or not the newly proposed solution will be acceptable to her group and if not, why not — here, the spoke is empowered by the group to make a decision on behalf of the group — “empowered spoke”
  - If the spoke(s) cannot adequately represent all the ideas of their groups, then any new proposed solutions should be taken back to the small groups for further discussion (“unempowered spoke”)
  - Each spoke should check to make sure she is adequately representing others’ ideas and opinions — change spokes to spread the skills and prevent stagnation
- No decision is made unless everyone represented in all the small groups would (does) consent to the decision
- To make the spokes-council more efficient, each small group should try to anticipate the concerns and problems other small groups will have with their solutions and discuss contingencies in advance of the spokes meeting.
- Fishbowl
  - A few people who feel strongest or have the most diverse viewpoints discuss an issue while everyone else listens to the debate from outside the “fishbowl”
  - Spokes-council meetings are often held in fishbowl format.
- Nods and Head Shaking (non verbal indicators)
  - When the facilitator asks the group simple questions (usually about the procedure), nod or shake your head in agreement or disagreement (or look puzzled or disturbed) to give others some indication of what you are feeling (without taking up much time).

## Evaluation

After a meeting, it is sometimes helpful to evaluate the meeting and note what went well and what did not go so well. During evaluation, participants should list positives, negatives, and discuss potential improvements to the process. Everyone should feel comfortable speaking honestly about what they observed, however they should be remember to be brutal towards problems and gentle towards people.

Some questions that can be asked to help guide the discussion include:

- How was the facilitation, the recording, the timekeeping?
- How was the meeting room, the temperature, the sound level?
- Did the group accomplish its goals?
- How was the tone of the meeting — did it feel good?
- Was anything left out or not covered sufficiently?

Evaluation is beneficial to the organization because it:

- Helps criticize the process and improve it
- Helps individuals learn how to perform their roles and tasks better
- Makes explicit any weird interpersonal dynamics so they can be acknowledged, discussed, and changed.

Here are some tips for getting the most out of the evaluation discussion:

- Try to minimize discussion and comments on others' evaluations — instead look for encompassing improvements for next time
- For improvements of the behavior of the people at the meeting use “I messages”
  - I feel ... (an emotion), when I see... (specific observation of the behavior), and I want... (an action – change of behavior).

## **Attitudes and Consensus**

The consensus process demands a lot from its participants, but the most important requirement is for participants to have the right attitude.

The following attitudes are desirable in a consensus environment:

- Responsibility - voice your opinions, actively listen to others, participate in the discussion, search for alternative solutions, and work to implement decisions
- Self-discipline - speak clearly, briefly, and to the point without interrupting, repeating, or speaking on behalf of others; relax and allow others to think well or make mistakes without your control
- Respect - be courteous and trust that others will act intelligently and responsibly
- Cooperation
  - Look for areas of agreement and build on them
  - Avoid competitive, right/wrong, win/lose thinking
  - Express your disagreements with ideas, not with people — try to love people even when your ideas conflict
  - Use disagreements to learn, grow, and change

- Work to build unity — but not at the expense of anyone's individuality
- non-violence
- collectivism (focus on the group rather than the individual)
- appreciation of the inherent worth of others
- empowerment
- compassion/altruism
- honesty/trust
- desire to learn and teach.

Promotion of these attitudes will help the group work well together. Other attitudes are detrimental to consensus and will likely result in a breakdown of the process:

- violence
- coercion
- competition
- individualism
- shirking responsibility .

The group must strive to promote desirable attitudes and condemn undesirable attitudes. People expressing harmful attitudes should be confronted about them. In general, consensus works best when:

- Participants share basic values
- Participants value the other participants and get along with them
- Participants are informed — they have enough information so that they are all evaluating the same situation
- Participants make a commitment to work together and take responsibility for the well-being of the group
- Participants listen well to each other so they can understand why they have differences of opinion
- Participants can evaluate information in a rational fashion — even unusual solutions
- Participants allocate enough time for a participative process
- Participants have skills in group process, conflict resolution, and problem sharing — or at least are open to letting people skilled in these areas facilitate
- Participants are mature and easy-going, willing to accept minor differences of opinion and preferences
- Participants take each other seriously and really try to work things out.

## **Problem Solving**

Consensus is all about solving problems. In fact, if problems didn't exist there would be no reason for a

consensus process because the optimal solution would always exist and would always be obvious to everyone. Of course, problems do exist so it is necessary to have strategies for dealing with them. The following are some problem solving strategies that may be useful for tough problems.

- Depersonalize the discussion and the decision — how can the group work together to solve their mutual problem?
- Consider an idea from the perspectives of other people
- Brainstorm, explore, experiment, turn things upside down and backwards
- Go back to basics, question your assumptions, be irrelevant and irreverent, pose silly answers, ask dumb questions, fantasize another world where this problem doesn't exist
- Work backwards from the answer and see where to begin
- Put it away, sleep on it, try again later.