

Introduction to Consensus Decision-Making



Consensus is a term that gets used a lot. For example, organisations like the United Nations say they try to reach a consensus; politicians and journalists speak of a consensus emerging around an important issue. What they often seem to be talking about is not actually consensus, but rather is 'a significant majority' view, without being clear about that. At the other end, often a group of friends will come to a consensus about where to go or what film to see, without using the term.

What is consensus?

A consensus decision is one that everyone involved can agree to; it may not be their first choice, but it is something to which they can all consent.

At Rhizome we see consensus primarily as a set of values, or a state of mind. Our experience is that, with the right state of mind, consensus can deliver high quality decisions that have the genuine support of a whole group, with results that are more creative and effective.

A good consensus process can deepen the connection of a group who share values and common ground. Consensus works because the common ground is stronger than the difference within the group. It can help a group to challenge and transform oppressive

behaviour as it values those on the margins of a group as much as, or possibly even more than, those in the mainstream of the group. Groups learn to see their diversity as a strength.

Consensus also offers a range of ways to relate to a proposed decision. For example, it allows for people to stand aside from implementing a decision that they may be lukewarm about whilst giving their agreement to the rest of the group to go ahead.

The state of mind involved in consensus includes a genuine willingness to:

- Work co-operatively and collaboratively in a group and trust others in the group to be doing the same.
- Recognise that there are likely to be many opinions, all of equal value to your own.
- Listen to and hear the full breadth of opinions, trying to ensure everyone knows that they are valued.
- Look for solutions that work for the wider group, not just yourself, paying special attention to those at the margins of the group (without marginalising others through so doing).
- Supportively challenge prejudice and abuses of power, and have our own behaviour challenged because we acknowledge that none of us are free of unwelcome social conditioning.

Facilitation of consensus decisions



A consensus decision-making process needs facilitation. That's not to say it needs a facilitator, as groups can share facilitation roles between them, but having a designated facilitator/facilitation team can make things easier by ensuring the process is transparent, clear & that everyone feels free to participate.

How does consensus compare to other decision-making processes?

Majority decisions

Majority decisions are a more common form of participatory decision making in a group, often using some form of voting. Options include a simple majority (i.e. above 50%) or a range of percentages above this. However, majority decisions can create a disenfranchised minority. Consensus focuses on hearing those in the minority, and ensuring that proposals include their perspectives. This doesn't mean that a minority always holds sway (sometimes referred to as the tyranny of the minority), but it does mean that it should always feel heard.

Unanimity: we talk until we all agree

People sometimes think of consensus as unanimity, they may say they discuss an issue until they are all in agreement. If strong unanimous agreement can be reached, that's great, but there are issues with seeking unanimity as the ultimate goal:

- Unanimity may be intolerant of diversity, and may build a culture of uniformity. Consensus should be about unity, not uniformity. The mechanisms that encourage and allow individuals to consent whilst expressing some disagreement provide an important safety valve which can encourage diversity and tolerance.

- Searching for unanimity can lead to over-long meetings that sap energy from a group rather than energise it.
- Unanimity may only be found by compromising and accepting the lowest common denominator option, which may be a weak and unsatisfactory decision. Consensus asks people to be flexible and seek the highest common factor.

A 'meeting with hand signals'

Hand signals are a facilitation technique used in large meetings to assess agreement non-verbally, and it can be a simple opinion testing tool that doesn't stop the flow of discussion. It's an attempt to facilitate for equality and participation, but they are not a consensus process in themselves.



Consensus minus one

Some groups have found consensus hard to achieve, but they have an ideological commitment to it so they've found short-cuts such as 'consensus minus one'. Groups develop a rule that allows them to overrule a single block if everyone else agrees. This is understandable in very large groups. However, this is essentially significant majority by another name, with all the risks that entails. Even though the majority could be 90% of the group or more, it can still alienate people.