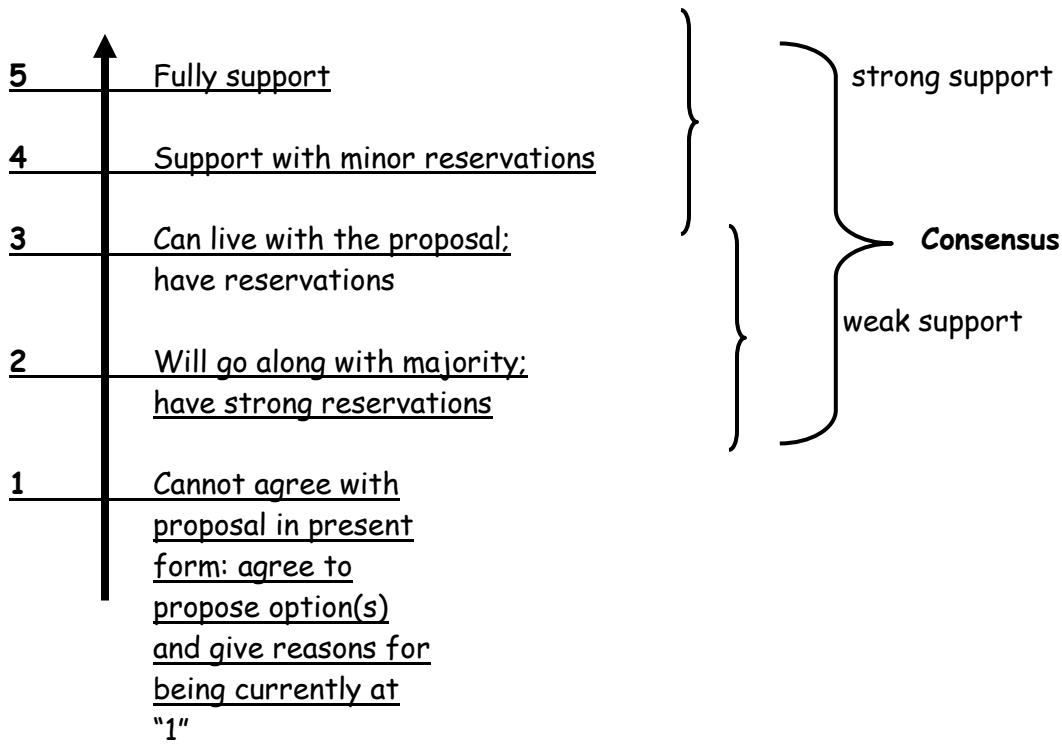


Consensus

Consensus building is a process; reaching consensus is an outcome.



The process.¹ After discussion and negotiation, a straw poll is taken, with every person registering her/his support or lack of support for the specific proposal.

All persons agree to articulate their reasons for support, their reservations and reasons. The facilitator asks persons at "1" on the scale questions such as, "what would need to change for you to move to 2?" (In many organizations, decision-making groups explicitly specify that persons at "1" on the scale must be willing to offer optional proposals or specific changes to proposals; in other words, persons at "1" cannot simply block the proposal room for further negotiation.) If time runs out or the group cannot find consensus, the group may either abandon the proposal or move to the back-up decision-making model that the group/organization uses (e.g., voting.)

The outcome. Consensus is reached when all persons are at 2,3,4 and 5. Decisions with high importance (e.g., far-reaching implications affecting many people over a long period of time) need stronger consensus than minor decisions with lower stakes. Therefore, if the decision is very important (by criteria you establish), the group may decide to keep discussing and modifying a proposal until members can all declare themselves to be at 3-5 on the scale, with many/most members at 4 and 5. Part of the beauty of the scale is that the group can keep testing for consensus, probing and deciding together the degree of consensus support that *this* decision needs.

¹ Adapted from S Kaner, Facilitator's Guide to Participatory Decision Making (New Society, 1996)

A 4-stage process for decision making

I use the term "problem solving" to mean the process people use when they work together to "plan, create, solve problems and make decisions."²

1. Discover and agree on the focal issue/problem/challenge/task.
 - a. Share perceptions of the problem.
 - b. Agree on what the problem/challenge/task is
2. Find and agree on cause/relevant inputs to the focal issue/problem/challenge/task. Questions include:
 - a. What is relevant data?
 - b. What contributes to the problem or are causes? What are gaps to address?
 - c. Agree on what inputs are used, their meaning and significance.
3. Find and agree on solutions. Micro-processes at this stage may include:
 - a. Create and agree on a picture of the ideal—once planning is done or solutions are found.
 - b. Generate many possible solutions.
 - c. Agree on criteria and group processes that will be used to choose solutions or agree on priority actions.
 - d. Choose and agree on solutions or priority actions.
4. Create and agree on an implementation plan.
 - a. Rough out an implementation plan.
 - b. Agree on an implementation plan (including what will happen, by when, who is responsible, how progress will be monitored, etc.)

Consensus: an option on a continuum³

1. Manager, director(s) with delegated authority for specific tasks makes the decision by her/himself/themselves.
2. Manager, director(s) gets information from selected others, then reaches a decision her/himself/themselves. You seek relevant facts, not advice or counsel. The final decision is the manager's, director's (s') to make.
3. Manager, director(s) consults with those in appropriate roles, asking for advice or counsel. The final decision is the manager, director(s)' to make.
4. Manager, director(s) gives the decision to a smaller group whose task is to bring back a recommendation or recommendations. The final decision is the leader's or leader group's to make.
5. Manager, director(s) takes the issue before the ownership and makes clear that resolution will be a group decision. The leader is one owner, with input of no greater weight than that of other group members. The decision making process used is voting.
6. Same as number 5 except that the decision making process is consensus building. If consensus fails, the group should have a fall-back in place. For example, some groups using voting as a fallback decision process.

² Straus, D. *How to Make Collaboration Work* (Berrett-Koehler, 2002), p. 5.

³ Adapted from Osland, Kolb & Rubin, *Organizational Behavior, an Experiential Approach* (Prentice Hall, 2001)

More practices for democratic governance

1. Read Merryn's article on decision making in the March, 2010 VEOC newsletter at <http://www.veoc.org/newsletters/march10.html>.
2. Clearly define how each decision, or each class of decision (e.g., annual budgeting) will be made and by whom, with what level of participation. See "a continuum of decision making options."
3. Share information based upon shared values. For example, if a central value is diffusion of authority, then decision making will be distributed in so far as it is possible and practical. Information teaches, and therefore is a resource for building competence, culture-building, ownership and succession. Skills and knowledge are also kinds of information to be shared.
4. A communication plan should go along with every company-wide decision. Who should know what, when, by what means?
5. Put conflict management protocols in place, and teach everyone how to use them. For example, if consensus building fails, what is the default process? If employees or managers disagree, to whom do they go? What will be the staff's access to the board, and by what procedures? Using group guidelines for dialogue is a conflict management tool; see number 5, below.
6. Clearly define roles, including individual employee roles (e.g., manager, line staff) and group roles (e.g., the purview of board decision-making, and the purview of management decision making.) Spell out specific authority to specific individuals for particular work/tasks, and allocate tasks "along rational criteria."⁴ "Ability, interest and responsibility have got to be the major concerns" in job allocation.
7. Use meeting tools, e.g., facilitator(s), time keeper, and record keeper. Try out or adapt these guidelines for dialogue (from Roger Schwarz, *The Skilled Facilitator*), for example.
 1. Talk about your assumptions.
 2. Explain the reasons behind what you say, ask and do, and invite questions.
 3. Be specific—use data, examples.
 4. Share all information relevant to this meeting.
 5. Focus on common ground, not fixed positions.
 6. Disagree openly with any member of the group.
 7. Jointly design ways to test disagreements and solutions.
 8. Discuss undiscussable issues.
 9. Keep the discussion focused.
 10. Avoid "talking over" others: interrupting and side conversations.
 11. Avoid comments to or about others at others' expense.
 12. Agree on what important words mean.
 13. All members participate in all phases of the process.
 14. Be explicit about the decision-making process used.
 15. At the end, evaluate the meeting.
8. Build a company-wide, explicit understanding that employees will practice direct communication. Teach peer coaching that encourages problem-solving aimed at encouraging direct communication. See William Whitmore, *Coaching for Performance* (Nicholas Brealey, 1996).

⁴ Most information here comes from my consulting and broad reading in organizational development. Here I am quoting Jo Freeman, writing in "The Tyranny of Structurelessness" about decision-making in feminine collectives. See www.anarres.org.au/essays/amtos.htm. Accessed 5/28/07.