

Tackling the Myths about Consensus Decision Making¹

The word *consensus* conjures up images of tedium, destructive conflict and manipulation for many people...

- ... do you envisage long, painful meetings with participants arguing endlessly about pedantic details until everyone agrees on every *dotted 'i' and crossed 't'*?
- ... or do you think of individuals pushing and pushing a group (by aggression or withdrawal) to shift further and further until their personal view is adopted - out of frustration, if nothing else!?!)
- ... or do you remember a scary, high-powered committee, where the Chair announced that the group would work by *consensus* - where it was assumed that unless someone *said something* a decision was agreed to, and you had to *make a fool of yourself* to challenge one of many *fait accompli's* put to meetings?

Consensus has a pretty bad name as an approach to decision making. This is largely because of the loose, and often inaccurate, way in which the word has been used. **None of the above examples are consistent with a constructive *consensus* approach to decision making.** They represent some of the key ways in which the word *consensus* has been misused to justify destructive decision making approaches.

This handout explores some common myths about *consensus*, based on these scenarios.

Myth 1: *Consensus* means every decision has to be made in a full group meeting.

It is true that some groups that seek to work from a consensus model do adopt this principle. This is a *lowest common denominator* approach to consensus decision making. It requires that **every** member of the group fully understands, and forms an opinion on, **every** aspect of group task and process. Accordingly, the group must operate at the level of the least informed/skilled/experienced member in relation to each decision. This approach can be viable in group settings which are focused on process with limited expectations of outcomes (eg. a therapy or consciousness raising group, and some shared learning groups).

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There are a number of *higher common denominator* approaches that can be legitimately used as part of a consensus process. All require that, **before beginning to make detailed decisions, the fundamental frameworks of the group are developed and agreed to** (eg. its values, vision, role, purpose, goals, rules and/or processes). Once a culture of ownership, clarity and trust is established, it is viable to send people away to achieve specific outcomes. In this cultural context, their suggestions will generally be adopted, provided their proposals are consistent with the group *frameworks*. Some ways this can occur are:

- Encourage everyone to *work from their strengths* - to contribute to the group through undertaking key work in their area of competence (alone or in small groups).
- Generate a shared learning environment through partnering people with competence in a particular area, with people who want to learn about that area. They go away and work on a task together. This allows members to focus their learning in their area of interest, enables several people in the group to learn new things simultaneously and reduces the risk of competitiveness or *put downs* in a group (when people are frustrated at the low rate of outcomes and pressure others to make quick decisions).
- Use a *task group* approach, where different members form short term sub-groups to undertake different tasks at different times. The key to this approach is for the group to set clear tasks on tight timelines. This protects against a hierarchical, committee-style structure emerging. It can be useful to adopt a rule that prohibits two *task groups* ever having the same membership.

Myth 2: Consensus depends on everyone absolutely agreeing with every decision made.

This is a recipe for competitiveness ... and failure! The chances of everyone **absolutely** agreeing with a **single** group decision are minimal ... let alone, the myriad of decisions that must be made by most groups!

Consensus aims to generate the highest possible quality of decision, by drawing on everyone's insights and knowledge and generating a **composite** outcome ... that is a combination of the best compatible elements of every group member's ideas. Generally, individuals will be able to contribute ideas toward some decisions and not toward others.

Valuing of people's willingness to **follow** on some decisions, whilst **leading** on others, is a critical element of constructive consensus. The willingness to *suspend judgment* and/or not insist on understanding every detail in areas not central to you, is a part of being a constructive member of a consensus group. It can be useful for group members to ask themselves - *Can I live with that?* The willingness not to *block consensus* where you feel the group:

- Adequately understands the issues,
- Has heard your *point of view* fully,

- Is aware of all the possible decisions they could make, and,
- Has considered the likely consequences of the group-preferred decision.

is a key to **shared** power in the group.

It is important that everyone can feel a sense of *ownership*² of decisions, and therefore has a commitment to implementation/support of them. However this doesn't necessarily mean they need to agree with them fully. Where someone feels a high level of group ownership, 2 aspects of self interest are operating - **both** their personal opinion **and** the group's best interest. A group member may happily support a decision with which they do not personally agree, **if** the decision is not in conflict with their personal values, **and if** they see their support as being important to the life of the group. Coming to a consensus group with an attitude of curiosity and enthusiasm for trying new ideas, is a definite asset!

This approach in no way proposes that participants should *back down* on issues they feel strongly about ... only that they should be constantly examining their own motives for pursuing a particular position. It is equally a matter for concern in a consensus group where **either** one individual has to put a strong view on every decision **or** an individual constantly says *I can live with that!*

Myth 3: Within Consensus it's OK for individuals to use competitive strategies to ensure an outcome they agree with.

We have all been socialised into using competitive (*win/lose*) behaviours, in order to have our preferences/needs/rights met. Competitive behaviours can be active (eg. aggression) or passive (eg. withdrawal). It can be very difficult to overcome our personal patterns of a lifetime! Part of being a cooperative group is to acknowledge how hard it is to change behaviour.

The individual (or sub-group) who *push* the group until they adopt their position (often out of frustration) is being competitive. **Consensus approaches are concerned with achieving cooperative (*win/win*), collaborative outcomes.**

One way to maximise the chances of cooperative behaviour is to name group-preferred behaviours in advance (ie. *group agreement* setting). **This contributes to a culture of *building people up, rather than tearing them down.*** Some of the group *norms* that can be useful in pre-empting competitive behaviours are:

- Aiming to provide an alternative if you criticise someone's idea.
- Speaking only for yourself (eg. *I Statements*).
- Summarising the other person's view before putting yours.
- Validating both active/leading/task and passive/following/process participation and contribution.

² A *high ownership group* is one where both common ground and differences are understood and a variety of actual and potential contributions of members are affirmed.

- Naming everyone's right to equal *air time*, if they want to use it.
- Affirming everyone's right to ask for *time out* for reflection.

Naming in advance the process by which difficult decisions will be made, is another useful proactive tool. **It is important to recognise that even the most amicable discussion is low level conflict.** Therefore, any of the preventative or responsive tools used in *conflict processing* can be usefully applied in a *low key* way to consensus decision making.

Myth 4: Consensus works from the assumption that silence indicates agreement.

Sometimes this is true! In situations where the group is processing a large amount of data, it can be both effective and efficient to **suggest** going into *silence as consent* mode for a period of time. In a safe group, with an affirming culture, participants **know** that if they dissent, their point of view will be valued and pursued seriously. They may well be willing to agree to using this technique.

This is completely different from **default consensus** being used as a tool of intimidation - as in the example of the *high-powered committee* given earlier. **Some of the situations in which *silence as consent* is an inappropriate strategy are:**

- Where the issues being raised are expected to be contentious. (This sets up individuals to become *trouble makers*, and immediately puts them *on the defensive* ... an invitation to competitive behaviours!)
- Where there has been recent tension in the group.
- Where one or more group members are *sitting outside the group* - physically or emotionally.
- As an ongoing/key approach to decision making.

In short, this approach is best used in situations where everyone is willing to be **task oriented** for a period, to get a particular job done. **It is only appropriate in a high trust/high commitment/high ownership group.**

Myth 5: Consensus can operate in a group where structural or significant power differences exist.

Structural and *significant* power differences are quite different issues. *Structural power* exists, in its most obvious form, in situations like workplaces. It is not viable for a full consensus approach to be adopted in a situation where one person has the authority to make decisions in their own right (eg. manager and staff; staff and clients; parents and children).

Structural power can also exist in more subtle ways - where different members of a group have more or less power in wider society. Can men and women operate on a full

consensus model together? What about young and old people? Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people? This is clearly a question requiring further thought.

Significant power is in the eye of the beholder. If a group member **feels** powerless, then they are unlikely to seriously challenge those who daunt them in the group. This raises the question of whether they can take on the level of personal power/ownership required to be a fully contributing group member. If they *play victim*, this will be likely to bring out the *competitive ire* of more confident group members.

If you assess a situation as unlikely to suit a full consensus approach, there are still a number of ways you can draw on *consensus thinking* to improve people's experience in the group, and maximise the quality of decisions made:

- Be clear about power differences in the group, and the limits on people's power. Be open to hearing everyone's perceptions of the situation and its likely impact on the task. Develop strategies around this.
- Focus on using tools that will generate a wealth of *possibility data*, which can be used to inform decisions, regardless of who ultimately makes these (eg. Brainstorming, *Po* Brainstorming, Ethical Consultation, *Web Charts*, *Visual Planning*).
- Consider *suspending status* for periods of time during the process (eg. for developing understanding of issues/differences; for generating possibilities).
- It is always an option for those with power to decide to *suspend status* altogether, and agree to support the outcomes of the group (given that they will have an equal say in group decisions, and always have the option within the group of blocking consensus - albeit, once status is suspended, not from the motivation of seniority).
- Use a modified process of consensus where you work toward consensus, preferably through a clearly defined process³, but if consensus can't be reached by a certain point, seniority or % vote (eg. 75% - 80% if you want group commitment to the decision) can be used to decide the issue.

Myth 6: Consensus can be imposed on a group.

Consensus relies completely on the commitment of every member to the process. **One opponent will typically use any/all the strategies in the examples used in the introduction to this handout, to undermine the viability of the group and its decisions.** It would be an unusually resilient group that could withstand this kind of onslaught and not begin to use competitive tactics in response!

³ Some really useful processes are outlined in Coover, Virginia et al (1985) **Resource Manual for a Living Revolution: A Handbook of Skills and Tools for Social Change Activists**, New Society Publishers, Philadelphia. See particularly pages 52 - 53 for an overview of their approach, and pages 80-93 for some techniques.

Edward De Bono's work is loaded with concepts and processes relevant to a consensus approach. In particular, having 6 group members each take on a perspective through which a decision can be made, can help break down barriers and encourage creative thinking about possibilities. See: De Bono, Edward (1985) **Six Thinking Hats**, Penguin Books, London.

The absolute reliance on each member's engagement, underlines the importance of mutual care in a consensus group. Each individual member needs to feel valued and worthwhile, in order to feel confident to offer their best ... particularly those dissenting views that are so often critical to a quality decision which takes account of a range of possible perspectives.

Whether to use consensus needs to be considered in the context of the following factors:

- An assessment of the real level of potential power of the group.
- An assessment of the competencies of the group as a whole, and individual members within it.
- An assessment of the willingness/motivation of members to take responsibility for decision making.
- An assessment of the level of information existing and required in the group (and therefore, the viability of members being adequately informed to make quality decisions).
- An assessment of the political merits of using consensus, rather than other methods of decision making.
- An assessment of members' willingness/ability to contribute time to undertaking the ground work (group *framework*/cultural development) or process (thoroughness of decision making where required).

It is critical that members are provided with opportunities to thoroughly explore positive and negative consequences of adopting a consensus approach (short and long term; individually and collectively), before making a commitment to working in this way.

Conclusion

Every decision-making method can be employed more or less effectively. The scenarios outlined at the beginning of this handout are more likely to occur in a competitive, than a consensus, setting. Used appropriately, consensus can be a particularly efficient and effective decision making approach. The efficiency can operate at a short and long term level - sometimes, investment in *ground work* saves enormous time being spent debating symptomatic differences over and over.

Constructive approaches to consensus produce high quality decisions, and people with a personal investment to implement them!