Consensus Decision-Making

When a board, executive team, committee, or project team decides that it will make a decision on the basis of *consensus*, there are a number of things to consider.

The group needs to be clear about the definition of consensus. (What is the end state?)

The group needs to agree on how they will reach consensus. (How do we get to the end state?)

This document contains one view of consensus and a method for translating the view into action.

The Value of Consensus

Although it takes longer in many cases, consensus decision making tends to promote higher quality decisions, to get more members of the group committed to the decision, and to generate decisions that enhance the probability of achieving the desired outcome.

Definition

Consensus means that members are willing and able to "live with" the recommendation or decision.

"Live with" in a consensus setting means that members of the group will:

- Support the decision during implementation
- Not criticize or disown the decision outside the group meetings.

Not Consensus – Alternative Ways of Making Decisions

Several ways of making decisions do not constitute *consensus*:

- **Unanimity** – A decision in which everyone agrees totally with everything.
- **Majority** – Decision making characterized by a vote. The majority makes the decision.
- **Scientific** – A metric is established and tools utilized to assess the extent to which an option meets or exceeds the established metric.

Guidelines for Getting to Consensus

✓ Everyone gets to speak their piece or have their say

✓ Everyone is entitled to all the information necessary and available for the analysis and decision

✓ The group decides (using a vote or other polling technique) when all the issues have been discussed sufficiently

✓ A single member of the group cannot block a decision. It takes at least two members who are unable to "live with" a decision to keep the group from reaching consensus. At some point, if a single member cannot live with the mainstream proposal, he or she must propose an alternative. If the alternative or some part of it is not acceptable, then the member agrees, by default, to "live with" the rest of the group's decision.[1]

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[1] Note: In some cases, some portion of the alternative provides a way to modify a decision or recommendation such that it improves the proposal and is acceptable to all.

70% Criterion

Based on the earlier definition, let's call 100% agreement with a proposal in a group, "*unanimity*." As noted earlier unanimity is <u>not</u> consensus. Further, in complex situations, it is almost impossible to achieve unanimity. If you do get a decision, it takes far more time and energy than the alternatives to decision making. The unanimity method is appropriate to some very critical situations, but will be a barrier to progress if frequently applied to decision making.

When we are talking about "consensus," group members sometimes ask: "How do I know when I am at the point I can live with and support a decision." To answer, we borrow from the Saturn Corporation <u>70% criterion</u>. This criterion means that 100% is the point at which the individual <u>totally</u> supports a decision option. Saturn recommends that in business situations, the individual define personal consensus as at the point at which "70% of me says I can live with it; the other 30% says there may be a better alternative." Saturn suggests that when you reach the 70% point of agreement as an individual, you call this the point at which you can "live with the decision."

Below is a graphic representing four individual members' feelings about the proposed consensus decision option. The graphic displays various members' level of support for the decision:

Member A	65%	Member B	75%
Member C	95%	Member D	85%

Only *Member A* has not reached the 70% level. Initially, the group would not have consensus. However, if the one member cannot shift his or her position and is not able to offer an alternative that the group will consider or use to modify the existing proposal, then the group will have consensus by definition.

Proposal #1-Consensus Rating for Each Member of the Committee

100% Agreement = Unanimity **95%**

60% **75%** *70% Agreement = "I can live with it."* **85%**

Less than 70% = No Agreement

| Member A | Member B | | Member C | Member D |