

Consensus

By Robbie Burke, New Zealand Playcentre Life Member, Te Whānau Tupu Ngātahi – Playcentre Aotearoa



Consensus replaces majority rule and top-down leadership with a collaborative culture where all are equals committed to a common purpose. It's about uniting behind an outcome that participants believe is the best way to go after considering all the facts, risks and implications – everyone understands why and that it fits with the vision, values and goals of the group as a whole.

What is it?

Consensus is a questioning process that allows those who have to live with the outcome to work together to develop an acceptable outcome – listening to different voices, respecting opinions, sharing information,

harnessing diversity, weaving ideas, and finding the best way forward. There are several ways to work by consensus – all require patience, creativity, flexible thinking and a co-operative spirit. Consensus building

encourages full participation, emphasises learning rather than winning, replaces competitive attitudes with authentic listening, fosters better relationships and builds respect. The consensus process seeks out the synergy of the group to reach its best solution rather than compromising to a middle ground, settling for the lowest common denominator, or overpowering a minority view. At the end of the consensus process when a solution is apparent, the facilitator will seek confirmation of the outcome by applying a decision rule agreed to at the start of the meeting.

Consensus is NOT a voting process, nor is it about unanimity, conformity, dreary discussions going nowhere, overpowering the minority, giving in, coercion/manipulation, top-down leadership, settling for the lowest common denominator.... It is inappropriate to use the consensus process when:

- the proposal requires a yes/no response
- the group has no control over implementing the outcome
- it perpetuates injustice.

What's needed to make Consensus work?

There are five essential ingredients that contribute to the co-operative spirit required for an effective consensus process:

- 1** shared understanding of the purpose and values – sense of belonging, commitment to working together
- 2** willingness to share power, to give up ownership of ideas, to consent to a decision
- 3** informed commitment to the consensus processes, connection with the culture of consensus, an understanding of how it will work and what it might look like or mean for their group
- 4** skilled facilitation that shows open-mindedness about topics and outcomes; fair treatment of participants.



- 5** a strong agenda – overview of meeting content and outcomes, informed participants.

The facilitator and participants also have significant roles in making the consensus process work!

Participants – an effective meeting depends on productive participants who demonstrate attitudes and behaviours that support the process and offer a qualitatively different kind of participation than is required by other forms of decision making. Two kinds of contribution are basic to a good consensus process – clear presentation of personal ideas/opinions and encourage of others' participation.

In the course of consensus building participants are encouraged to assume a number of process roles: contributor (ideas, knowledge, feelings...), listener, team player, creative thinker/problem solver, learner. A number of participation formats have been developed to help groups be productive and ensure the diversity



TIPS
to help participants engage in consensus building.

Do your homework

Be committed to working together

Share ideas/concerns/solutions with clarity

Listen and try to understand

Ask questions of others and don't just try to sell ideas

View ideas and suggestions from all perspectives - be open to influence by others

Don't try to talk someone out of their point of view but try to find ways to address their concerns

Criticise ideas and positions, not each other

Don't change your mind just to avoid conflict, know how to register dissent

Be aware of the reactions of others - offer support, give feedback about your feelings

Think creatively, find solutions - strive for what is best for everyone concerned

of ideas are heard: small groups, round robin, buzzing, caucusing, bus stops, two-house model, fishbowling.

Facilitator – servant of the group, assisting and guiding but not controlling, creating an atmosphere of openness and trust. The main functions of a facilitator are:

- 1 process guide - suggest/manages methods of working together, keeps discussion on track, ensures participation, monitors behaviours
- 2 neutral third party - content neutral, unbiased, assisting & guiding but not controlling, creates atmosphere of openness & trust
- 3 tool giver - skilled in range of problem solving & decision-making methods
- 4 process educator - improving group's understanding of processes
- 5 foster the spirit & intent of consensus - encouraging full participation, assisting co-operative search for solutions, fostering unity, promoting learning.

Facilitating tough meetings is a lot like cultivating roses. It's possible to obtain considerable beauty yet it's essential that you be disciplined and that you hold the flowers gently and with respect. If there's no pruning, you get chaos and few blossoms; if you hold too tightly, there'll be blood all over the place. There are times when a facilitator needs to be directive, as when the group drifts off topic, indulges in repetition, or deteriorates into squabbling. Yet facilitators can make the mistake of reaching for toughness when unsure what to do, when afraid to trust the group, or when faith in the process is weak. You want to work among the thorns, not upon them. However, just as the facilitator needs to trust the group, the group needs to trust the facilitator. They need breathing room to manifest the bouquet.

What procedures enhance the process?

Decision criteria - when the problem/issue has been identified the group should develop a set of acceptable requirements/outcomes (not negotiables, measures...) for evaluating possible solutions against. The more



specific the group can be the easier it is to shape solutions upon which the group can agree.

Ground rules — at the start of the meeting participants should discuss and agree on acceptable behaviours and proper procedures (processes, content boundaries) that will help build a culture of respect, openness and trust. The time spent creating a shared understanding of the ground rules is well worthwhile – provides a framework for better meeting habits, gets buy-in and commitment, and helps keep the group on track.

Decision Rule — accepting that there are two independent components to consensus – a collaborative agreement-building process and a decision rule that denotes the percentage of agreement required – paves the way to retain the values and goals associated with consensus and shed the agonising problems that occur when you simply can't get everyone to agree. At the beginning of a meeting, participants develop a shared understanding of what “reaching consensus” looks like for that group at that time – full consent, unanimity minus 1 or 2, no more than 2 stand asides...with maybe an 80% supermajority voting fallback as an acceptable

alternative decision-making process to use when a decision is crucial but agreement is not achievable.

Withdraw Concern — a dissenter may choose to withdraw their concern because they believe it is better for the group as a whole to consent to the proposal than spend time trying to resolve the concern. This is especially valid if the concern is based on an individual's need or preference.

Stand Aside — happens when a person, who feels that their concern (personal conscience or strongly differing individual opinion) has been listened to, understood and considered but not necessarily accepted in the final decision, recognises that it may be all right for the rest of the group and is prepared to permit the decision to go ahead. This must be a decision of the dissenter – and comes with an understanding that non-participation in implementing the decision is acceptable. If there are more than one or two stand asides then it is a signal that the group is not yet in alignment.






Blocking — should only be used in extreme circumstances and the blocker can clearly show why it

Decision-making in Playcentre

violates the organisation's values, underlying principles or purpose. It is helpful if legitimate grounds for a block can be determined by the group at the start of discussion. Blockers have an obligation to share their concerns and participate fully in the discussion to

find a way forward. While blocking undermines the constructive atmosphere of a group, it is inappropriate to ask a blocker to stand aside, rescind their objection or pressure them to agree.

What does the process look like?

<p>PREPARATION</p> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • prepare/circulate issues/proposals, gather background info, access expertise... • appoint a facilitator – neutral, process educator/guide, tool giver • ensure all understand the consensus process and how it will work • clarify the decision rule – what “an acceptable outcome” might look like
<p>DEFINING SPACE</p> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • establish ground rules – behavioural, procedural, substantive • define the problem/issue, determine desired outcomes • develop decision criteria for evaluating possible solutions
<p>PROBLEM SPACE</p> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • build relationships, gather diverse perspectives/ideas • active exchange of knowledge/experience and possible solutions • listen to understand, suspend judgement • identify concerns, raise difficult issues, find common threads
<p>GROAN ZONE</p> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • try to resolve concerns, reconcile diversity • challenge assumptions, try to understand • struggle to integrate, make collective sense and meaning • strengthen good ideas, enable the wisdom of the group to be heard
<p>SOLUTION SPACE</p> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • generate possibilities, synthesise ideas/solutions • build shared understanding, weave ideas/refine/revise • evaluate possibilities against agreed criteria & desired outcomes • craft an inclusive solution that all can live with • move from thinking/talking to taking action...decision point! • check for unresolved concerns, test for commitment • confirm outcome by applying the agreed decision rule
<p>DECISION SPACE</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • record the decision, clarify an implementation plan – who/when/how... <p>CELEBRATE!</p>

What gets in the way?

Seldom is the process completely smooth, participation equal and everyone happy with the outcomes. Viewing issues differently may lead to misunderstanding and miscommunication as people struggle to learn from each other. Dysfunctional behaviour is often the outcome of an unproductive situation and can generally be dealt with by members taking responsibility to work at the process of the meeting. Disagreements are a necessary and creative dynamic in most groups – in consensus disagreements are explored rather than avoided, so a certain amount of tension is expected and helpful.

Actions that obstruct progress:

forced consensus – bullying, marginalisation, overpowering the minority, aggressive leadership, misuse of power, majority rule

watering down of a decision – focusing on trade-offs and compromise to get support, suppressing dissent, giving in to avoid conflict, pushing to the “middle” without resolving concerns can lead to false consensus

when the scope of change needed is too drastic – too many components required to achieve the goal, too complex/radical, the more drastic the change needed the more reluctant people are to embrace it, all or nothing approach, lack of flexibility

dreary discussions going nowhere – more information or ideas required, dysfunctional behaviours, too open ended, lack of understanding of the process, polarised factions, it’s not about decisions by endurance!

defensive listening – ‘guarding’ own position, attached to ideas, closed minds, new ways of seeing/doing things challenging people’s beliefs/assumptions, unwilling to think creatively to find solutions, unwilling to share/explain underlying concerns

ineffective delegation – predisposed capabilities, failing to define what’s expected (options or proposal/explanation of alternatives considered/how decision criteria met...), unrealistic timeframes

inappropriate blocks – blocking because you disagree, don’t like, it goes against tradition, or to get your way is abuse of the power to block



bad behaviour – tolerating disrespectful comments or behaviour, hogging the floor, lack of trust, inability to work co-operatively

starting from a proposal instead of an issue – an overly developed proposal on anything important will evoke resistance and lead to participants feeling devalued/manipulated and developers of the proposal unappreciated, how proposal is presented & discussed

hijacking the process – power/position influencing outcome, facilitator merely a puppet, withholding information, focusing on results not on process, rushing the process, patriarchy.

Why use it?

Better processes, better outcomes, better collaboration...

inclusive participation engages and empowers group

