

# The Consensus Process

## Introduction

First of all, let's get one thing straight: consensus does not require that everyone be in perfect agreement with each other! Instead, it requires that all the serious concerns of the group be taken care of before consensus can be reached. This is one reason that it can take so much longer to arrive at a final decision in this manner. Compare this with “voting” systems, where people generally campaign for their favorite option(s) and may argue *past* each other rather than trying to reach a compromise.

Which is not to say that consensus is the perfect solution for decision making in all situations. Loosely associated groups where trust or familiarity is low will frequently struggle with the accommodations that consensus requires of all participants. On the other hand, open-ended decisions such as elections and drafting policies or positions may be ill-suited to the method, because of the bewildering number of options that quickly become possible (but see **Polling**, at the end). Gaia Community uses standard plurality voting for electing officers every April, and frequently refers the drafting of new policies to committees or smaller work groups, where they can work collaboratively. Consensus is excellent for arriving at yes/no decisions, on the other hand, because a lack of consensus means that **no decision is made**; i.e., that the previous state of affairs continues.

Because consensus relies so heavily on **informed decisionmaking**, it can be extremely helpful to present the options beforehand, preferably in writing. If this is not possible, two separate sessions may be helpful; one to explain (or propose) the options, and another to discuss concerns and attempt to arrive at consensus. Even more sessions may be required, if discussion continues past the time allotted.

You may have noticed the verbs here; “arrive at” or “reach” consensus, instead of “win” or “lose”. Consensus is designed to be an open-ended process that does not prematurely end just because a certain percentage of support exists; instead it works to resolve concerns and ensure that everyone's voice is heard so that when a decision is made, it will have the support of the entire group behind it.

### Types of Decisionmaking Procedures



## Roles in a consensus-based meeting

- I. **Facilitator.** This is a different role from the traditional “boss”, “president”, or “high priestess”. The key phrase here is “*non-directed leadership*”. If the facilitator is interested in making their own comments, concerns, or solutions known to the group, they **must** relinquish their role as facilitator to someone else for at least that portion of the meeting. This person's job is to make sure the process continues moving forward, **not** that it moves toward any one pre-determined conclusion. Among other things, this makes them responsible for seeing that the agenda which the group agreed to (via consensus!) is adhered to. If the agenda needs to be modified (for example, the group wishes to extend time or hold another meeting to continue discussion on concerns), then that needs to be a separate consensus process (comparatively brief). A separate **Timekeeper** may be helpful; in case the Facilitator is busy with helping the group through a difficult part of the process.
- II. **Vibes watcher.** This role is there to look out for the group's emotional health. Even in a trusting group operating by consensus, conflict and disagreement can lead to frustration, anger, or withdrawal from the process. This role is the only person who has permission to interrupt, and may

do so at any time they feel it necessary for the group to hear their observation. All of these “official” statements should be made to the group, however, not singling out a “side” or individual.

- III. **Notetaker.** This should also be someone without a strong predisposition toward one side or the other, as it will be difficult to make your own comments and keep recording them at the same time! A separate **Scribe** may be useful for writing up concerns, amending proposals, and making other notes that are intended to be read by the group during the process.
- IV. **Advocate.** This person's role is to who can help anyone who becomes overcome by emotion or is otherwise unable to articulate their comments/concerns to the group; it may become necessary for the two of them to step outside of the main meeting space to confer quietly before they return, and the Advocate can then speak on that person's behalf (checking to make sure they got it right afterward, of course).
- V. . While everyone should make an effort to arrive on time for the meeting, having someone available to answer questions for latecomers or catch up to speed anyone who had to step out due to a phone call, emergency, bathroom break, etc.

## So How Does It All Work?

The first thing to do is to state the proposal clearly, as mentioned above. Having it in writing will help, either by providing it on paper or posting it somewhere in the room. Any clarifying questions that are not related to the worth of the proposal should be sought first, so that everyone agrees on what the proposal actually intends to accomplish. There's no sense in going through the entire consensus process just to find out later that someone thought some crucial element of the proposal meant something different than everyone else did!

There's no set procedure for how to arrive at consensus, such as Robert's Rules of Order for parliamentary proceedings. Instead, most variations of the process deal with two problems:

- 1) how to ensure that all concerns are voiced and heard fairly;
- 2) how to work through all concerns without dismissing them.

An apparent paradox of consensus is that it requires conflict in order to function. If members abdicate their own opinions just to “go along with the group”, then the process is broken! If people feel that they cannot expect a reasonable audience for their concerns, then the trust of the group is harmed. Open discussion and resolution of conflicts and concerns makes the resulting decision stronger, not weaker.

Many times, consensus can be reached in very small matters without going through an entire formal structure. However it is important to give time and room for people to voice concerns in **every** consensus decision made, even if it is just the approval of the agenda for the meeting. One way to accomplish this is not to ask, “Is there consensus?” or “Do we all agree?”, but “Are there any concerns?” By framing the question as expecting that concerns will be voiced if they exist, the prejudice toward “going along to get along” is reduced.

If there are no concerns or objections in a reasonable period of time (related to the importance of the proposal), then **consensus is already reached**. However it is more likely that someone will have a concern or suggestion. This is the time to take all of those down and post them publicly as well; this may require a break to collect them all and distribute them to the group, although if they can be posted near the original proposal for the group to see, that will speed things up. Make sure to ask clarifying questions so that the concern is understood just as clearly as the proposal! Even more important, though, is that this is not the time for answering or dismissing those concerns! That comes later, after all concerns have been fairly heard, collected, and distributed. Avoid body language or questioning that makes the concerns seem silly, trivial, or misguided. Remember, these concerns may end up strengthening the end result!

One thing that may be possible here, however, is to gather together concerns which are similar or have common features. This should be done by the group, without trying to resolve any one concern or type of concern at this time. This merely allows related concepts to be dealt with more efficiently in the next aspect of the process.

Now resolve one concern (or type of concern) at a time. This is the part which will take the longest, but it must be done honestly and thoroughly for the final decision to have true consensus. Additional concerns may be raised during this process, either because of the resolutions proposed to earlier concerns, or because no one thought of them earlier. It is important, however, not to subvert the process by “holding in reserve” a concern until near the end and then dropping it on the unsuspecting group. This will harm the trust of the group and may result in a disruption of the meeting, or require additional meetings if time is running short. Open and honest communication is key to consensus being achieved.

An important note for those with concerns: if you approach the resolution phase as “me vs. them”, or attach a great deal of personal importance to the concern you've raised, you may find it difficult to work toward a satisfactory conclusion. Consensus is not about proving anyone right or wrong, it is about achieving the best possible solution for the group. While individual concerns are important, the decision to be made affects the group as a whole, and should be viewed from that collective perspective rather than an individual one. It is possible for a decision to affect you (or some other individual) negatively while still being better for the group as a whole. If that individual concern is shared by many members of the group, it will naturally lead to a lack of consensus without becoming “personal”.

### **Blocking or standing aside; ways to end the discussion**

In many cases, all concerns will be answered by amending the original proposal, or finding ways to alleviate concerns that are not directly related to how the proposal itself will be implemented (for example, someone may offer a ride to an individual who states that they cannot make it to meetings any longer if the location is changed). In other cases, though, discussion may no longer be productive and there are a couple of ways to proceed:

- 1) Refer the proposal (as amended) to a subgroup for further brainstorming and problem solving before bringing it back to the group. This is not intended to do an “end run” around the large group's consensus, but merely allows a focused group, preferably including some of those with concerns) to work on further ideas without the entire group spinning their wheels. The final decision cannot be delegated to the committee, however; it must be brought back to the full group for actual consensus to be achieved.
- 2) Those with concerns may choose to **stand aside**; traditionally at Gaia Community we have taken this as a lack of objection to the proposal and moved forward with consensus. However in some methods the remaining concerns are documented *with* the final decision as outstanding concerns that should be resolved in the future if possible, but are not important enough to block the implementation as a whole. Those who stood aside should be consulted in the future, to find out if resolution is possible while implementation is ongoing.
- 3) Sometimes there remain concern(s) of such magnitude that someone (not necessarily the person(s) who brought them up originally!) must **block** consensus from going forward. At this point those persons have made their decision; the group as a whole must decide whether or not the concern is legitimate. This is neither easy nor lightly done. A few questions may suffice for example:
  - (a) Is the concern rooted in the group's well-being, or the individuals?
  - (b) Have all reasonable steps been taken to resolve the concern, or could further discussion or brainstorming provide an answer?
  - (c) Is the concern valid and realistic?

**The group is still responsible for its own well-being**; an individual cannot hijack or subvert the system with unreasonable demands or a pre-conceived notion that “nothing could make me accept this proposal”, before any discussion ever occurs. If the group decides that the concern is not valid when applied to the group as a whole, they can ask the person to instead stand aside. If the concern is valid for the entire group and cannot be resolved, **then and only then is consensus blocked**.

## Now what?

No matter what the decision (or lack thereof) is that is made, two more tasks remain:

- 1) Evaluation of the process (not the decision).
- 2) Implementation, if the proposal achieved consensus in any form.

Evaluation does not have to take a long time; a few minutes to voice any reactions, feelings, or procedural concerns about the way the meeting/discussion went. This is not a time to rehash or point out problems with the *decision*, but to evaluate the process so that it will be better the next time. Not everyone must offer an evaluatory comment; keep them brief and speaking for yourself, not for others (“I” statements). Written evaluations may be easier than speaking them out loud for some people, so you may want to have that option available. Make sure that the evaluation comments are made a part of the record as well, so that they can be referred back to in the future.

Implementation, obviously, is beyond the scope of this document. But with proper consensus and therefore everyone able to support the final decision, you've got the hardest part behind you!

## Addendum: Open-ended Consensus

So earlier we mentioned that consensus is less well-suited to open-ended, multiple-choice decisions such as elections. That doesn't mean it can't work there as well, and one way to do that is through polling. Remember that if no consensus is reached on any of the options, the previous situation stands; this can certainly get in the way of an election, or deciding where to go for lunch!

A couple more steps are needed for open-ended consensus decisions: **brainstorming** and **polling/narrowing**. Brainstorming, the very first step, is probably a process you're familiar with: you can look at it as similar to the listing of concerns mentioned above, only for positive/desireable outcomes. No criticism should occur at this stage, remember! That sounds difficult, because you may feel like you're getting “too many” options or some truly unrealistic options. That's what the next step is for, though.

## Polling

Polling is not a voting process, but instead a narrowing of the options by *everyone* in the group. It can be done, for example, by giving everyone a certain number of tally marks (post-its, stickers, push-pins, etc) and having them mark the options they like best. Then the group and facilitator can look at the trends and (*without making it a vote*) reduce the list to the top X options. If any of the options with fewer tallies is strongly advocated for, the group may consider including it as well. In either case, the goal should be to reduce the number of options to those with the broadest support before getting into the details, rather than trying to “eliminate” certain options as unfeasible, unrealistic, or other specific complaints.