

IN CONSENSUS

*building deeper wisdom
through shared perspectives*

consensus the easy way...

the process of choice for groups and organizations
seeking more inclusive and lasting solutions

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ON CONSENSUS: Building Deeper Wisdom

True consensus

To enter consensus successfully, we must *agree to agree*. This is the essential ingredient to successful process: we must be willing to offer our opinions and then let them go. This doesn't imply that we *enter* the space agreeing. Indeed, while it is important that people joining consensus share values and share a common purpose for the group, having a variety of understandings of a problem and its solutions can create a better outcome.

Consensus can have a bad reputation as requiring a lot of time as well as great patience for endless process. And some poorly facilitated and improperly entered experiences justify that reputation. But with a well-trained group of people who are committed to it, consensus is an excellent method for a group to use in making important decisions.

Consensus is the practice of building deeper wisdom through shared perspectives. If we enter the process expecting that we will be respectfully heard and if we are willing to listen deeply to the perspectives of others, we can find common ground that responds to all our concerns – a solution that is better than that which any single person can offer.

True consensus is about 20% structure, 40% relationship and 40% philosophy or attitude.

The philosophy of consensus

As stated above, the essence of consensus is that we agree to agree, that no matter what different points of view may exist among us as we enter the discussion, we are committed to finding a wisdom beyond that which we can individually bring. We are committed to the group, we share a common understanding of the group's purpose, and we are basically in agreement over the values we share.

We are able to listen mindfully, heartfully to others who may have other perspectives and we value what they bring. We are able to look for underlying, complexifying issues that may be making the process difficult and either address them first or separate them out for later attention. Similarly, we can deal with emotions that may affect our thinking or unrelated concerns that might complicate the issue before us.

When conflict arises, we need to keep our focus on the issues rather than the personalities involved. And if appropriate, we readily submit to a conflict resolution process that the group sets in place, including exploring if the conflict arises from an over-identification with a personal agenda or point of view.

In this way, we can see that consensus is a living relationship that the members of a group enter into, not merely a structure that is followed.

The relationship of consensus

Consensus is a living relationship among participants. It's not something that can be picked up at the start of a meeting and left behind as we part. Nor can we enter consensus by simply following a flowchart of the process. The consensus relationship continues among board members between meetings and beyond board business. It asks us to maintain our clear speaking and heart-open listening, our mutual respect and willingness to resolve conflict among us. With deeper wisdom as our goal and through the integration of that which all participants bring to the circle, we will achieve our resolution.

Inherent in consensus is the need to rise above the initial presentation of a problem to get to the core of the issue as well as get beyond our personal concepts of solutions. To succeed, we cannot remain at the level of conflicting opinions or perspectives. It is therefore a transcending process, capable of lifting us out of problems and into a higher plane of responsiveness.

Structure: The four pillars of consensus*

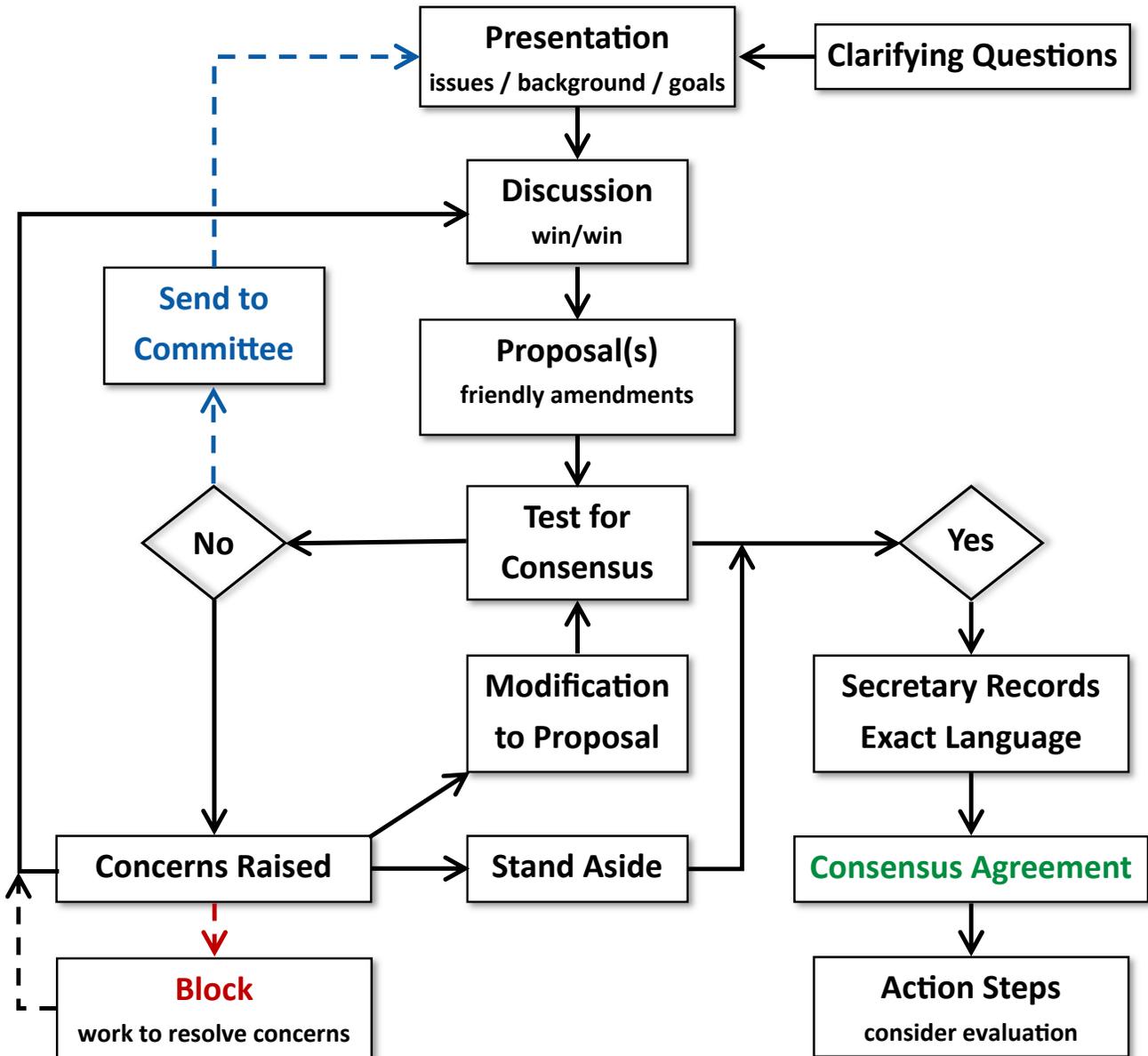
Beyond the flowchart that guides the decision-making process, there are four pillars* (or legs) on which consensus must rest:

- Mutual understanding: Mutual understanding refers to a shared awareness of the issue under consideration, but also a grasp of the problems that have led to the discussion as well as the proposed solutions. It's important to provide background information on the issue as well as allow plenty of space for participants to ask clarifying questions. There also has to be a respectful sense of the differing perspectives among members of the group.
- Full participation: It's not enough to simply get acquiescence from those involved in the process, it is imperative that everyone bring their perspectives into the considerations. Consensus benefits from having minority opinions expressed and graciously considered.
- Inclusive solutions: Inclusive solutions arise from the willingness of the participants to let go of their own concepts and agendas in order to integrate the perspectives of everyone.
- Shared responsibility: If we have begun our process with a mutual understanding of the issue, been willing to share our perspectives yet not hold onto them in order to integrate the perspective of the others, as well as work toward solutions that are inclusive of everyone's concerns, we emerge with the shared responsibility to see the consensus realized.

* Revised from Community in Action's "core values of participatory democracy.

Consensus Flowchart

Decision-making with Heart



and the Four Pillars of Consensus

Mutual Understanding

Full Participation

Inclusive Solutions

Shared Responsibility

Thanks to 'Community At Work' for the four core values of participatory democracy