

FORMAL CONSENSUS

A MODEL FOR MANAGEMENT AND COMMUNITY ORGANIZATION

FORMAL CONSENSUS:

- Specific kind of decision making
- Provides: foundation, structure & Collection of techniques for efficient and productive group discussions

Advantages:

- Non-violent
- Decisions will reflect entire group and not just the leaders
- Ownership of decisions by all and therefore, plans are carried out with greater satisfaction
- Two or more heads are better than one
- Requires practice and commitment for active cooperation, disciplined speaking, listening, respect

Formal Consensus Defined:

Group dynamics: A group is a number of individuals having some unifying relationship.

- Conflict is encouraged, supported and resolved cooperatively with respect, non-violence and creativity... it is desirable!
- Majority rule/competition vs. consensus/cooperation:

Majority Rule is a competitive dynamic created because the group is being asked to choose between two or more possibilities. Ideas are owned by individuals and defended in the face of improvements.

Consensus is a cooperative dynamic where one proposal (idea) is considered at a time. Everyone works together to make the best decision for the group. All voices are heard. Ideas are shared by the group = solutions shared. Characteristics of formal consensus:

- Consensus is the least violent decision making process. The will of minority taken into account...everyone is respected. It lacks power to dominate...all contributions are valued.

- It is the most democratic decision making process. It is inclusive...encourages participation...equal access to power...develops cooperation, empowerment. It creates a sense of individual responsibility for group synthesis and evolution vs. competition/attrition.
- It is based on principles of the group. Objections must address concerns of the individual and be in the best interest of the group as a whole.
- Works better when more people participate. Ideas build one upon the next = creative interplay.
- Not inherently time consuming...works better with patience as any process does.
- Cannot be secretly disrupted if practiced as taught – disruptive behavior must not be tolerated.

STRUCTURE OF FORMAL CONSENSUS

Levels or Cycles:

The purpose of defining levels is to allow the introduction of additional structure into the discussion to help resolve concerns and reach consensus.

LEVEL ONE: Broad scope to consider philosophical/political implications, general merits, drawbacks and other relevant information. The focus is on the proposal as a whole.

LEVEL TWO: Discussion limited to the general or overall concerns, they are identified and listed. The focus is on resolving the entire body of concerns or groupings of similar concerns.

LEVEL THREE: Scope is very narrow. The focus is to limit discussion to a single unresolved concern, remaining until resolved. This process requires strong facilitation and discussion techniques.

FLOW OF FORMAL CONSENSUS PROCESS

Ideally, proposals are submitted in writing and briefly introduced first time on the agenda.

INTRODUCTION OF PROPOSAL BY FACILITATOR

- Introduces individual presenting the proposal
- Gives short update/previous action
- Explains process which brought proposal to meeting
- Explains process to consensus/insure all understand structure

Proposal must be written and distributed (when possible in advance of the meeting); presenter reads out loud with background information; addresses benefits, reasons to adopt and concerns that pre-exist.

LEVEL ONE: BROAD DISCUSSION (GROUP OF CONCERNS)

- Philosophical/political debate: How proposal may effect group
- Individual concern not the focus
- Comments/ideas/other factual discussion
- General problems entertained
- Facilitator or presenter of proposal calls for consensus

CALL FOR CONSENSUS

Facilitator asks: “Are there any unresolved concerns?”/ “Concerns Remaining?” If no concerns...facilitator declares consensus reached and proposal is read or submitted for the record. Allow for silence to encourage everyone to be at peace with consensus. Any concerns for which someone stands aside are listed with the roposal and become part of it. If concerns remain...

LEVEL TWO: BRAINSTORM TO LIST CONCERNS AS A WHOLE

Discussion begins with brainstorming to identify and list all concerns. Facilitator diverts efforts to defend proposal or resolve concerns. After listed, group reflects on concerns as a whole, then discussion and attempt to resolve concerns as a whole...not focused on one particular concern. Do comments resolve concerns? If yes, call for consensus. If concerns remain...

LEVEL THREE: INDIVIDUAL CONCERNS

Restate concerns one at a time (Resolved concerns are removed) One concern: Questions which clarify the concern to achieve understanding before discussion begins: focus on suggestions, ideas to resolve. Repeat process until all are resolved. If concern/s remain...

CLOSING OPTIONS

1. Withdraw Concern: “Standing Aside”
Voluntary withdrawn: Facilitator asks if person/s with the concern are willing to “stand aside”, acknowledge that the concern still exists and allow adoption of the proposal. The unresolved concern is written down with the proposal in the record and becomes part of the proposal.
2. Send proposal to committee (or postpone decision till next meeting) If time allows:
 - Committee clarifies the concern/s, bring new and creative resolutions to the group.
 - Committee represents those who voiced the concerns and those most supportive of the proposal.

3. Declare a block to proposal
Facilitator recognizes all levels followed, time out, major concerns remain unresolved. The group is unwilling to allow more time or send the proposal to committee so the facilitator must declare the proposal blocked and move to the next agenda item.

RULES OF FORMAL CONSENSUS

1. Once a decision has been adopted by consensus, it cannot be changed without reaching new consensus.
2. One person speaks at any moment. (Role of peacekeeper/facilitator exempt from this rule to maintain order)
3. All structural decisions (i.e., which roles to use, who fills role, facilitation technique, etc.) are adopted without debate. Any objection creates new selection.
4. All content decisions (i.e., agenda contract committee reports, proposals, etc.) are adopted with and after debate. Discussed before consensus.
5. A concern must be based upon principles of the group to justify a block to consensus.
6. Every meeting which uses formal consensus must have evaluation.

CONFLICT AND CONSENSUS

This concept involves group's honest assessment of ability to honor the principles.

- Group must have statement of purpose/constitution that includes principles and values.
- The environment promotes:

TRUST: Examination of attitudes; open to new ideas; acknowledge and appreciate personal and cultural differences.

RESPECT: Listen; No interruptions; ideas taken seriously; criticize act, not the person; validate emotional and logical concerns.

UNITY OF PURPOSE AND NON-VIOLENCE: Use power to make decisions and achieve goals while respecting differences and cooperating; basic understanding about goals and purpose of group is shared.

SELF EMPOWERMENT: All participate.

COOPERATION: Shared responsibility in finding solutions to all concerns.

CONFLICT RESOLUTION: Conflict is expression of disagreement and diverse viewpoints; focus and explore strengths and weaknesses of attitudes, assumptions and plans; work together to discover which choice is best for all members; creates growth; engenders and requires patience.

COMMITMENT TO GROUP: Personal responsibility to behave with respect, good will and honesty; group needs prioritized over desires of an individual.

ACTIVE PARTICIPATION: Process of synthesis promotes trust by creating atmosphere where every contribution is considered valuable.

EQUAL ACCESS TO POWER: Avoid hierarchical structures by sharing power, skills, information; roles shared.

PATIENCE: More time to allow for creative interplay of ideas.

DEGREES OF CONFLICT

- Group determines a concern's legitimacy based on principles of the group/relevance to the group as a whole.
- If reasonable solution is offered and not accepted by the individual raising the concern, the group may decide the concern is resolved and individual is out of order for failing to recognize it.
- Individual expresses concern and the group resolves the concern.
- Blocking concern must be based on group principle, not individual preference, must be essential to group's welfare.

EVALUATION

Time at the end of the meeting that is devoted to:

- Improvement of structure of process/dynamics of the group
- Process interactions between members
- No discussion nor opportunity to comment on each others statements
- Not intended to re-open debate on agenda item
- Express feelings; highlight problems; foster communication
- Praise facilitator, members, process
- Focus on learning/growing
- Avoid blaming
- Open to pleasure of group

ROLES

AGENDA PLANNERS:

- Collect items/arrange
- Assign presenters
- Brainstorm discussion techniques
- Set time limits write up proposed agenda

FACILITATOR: “to make easy” “good will”

- Conducts group business/guides formal consensus process
- Role rotated for power/skill sharing
- Co-facilitation for balance (gender/ethnic/age etc.)
- Non-directive leadership, responsibility for:
 1. moving through agenda in allotted time
 2. guiding the process
 3. suggesting alternate/additional techniques
- If facilitator wants to participate, s/he must relinquish role and speak as an individual
- Needs of group, balance input
- Clarity of process: review what happens
- Responsible for honoring agenda contract

PEACEKEEPER: Large group/controversial topics – selected w/o debate

- Not personally invested in discussion
- Tensions are up, peacekeeper steps in to remind group of common goals and commitment to cooperation
- May call for moment/s of silence
- May interrupt speaker
- Comments always directed to group not individual
- Points out when group did something well

ADVOCATE: Selected w/o debate/last resort

- Interrupt meeting when someone is unable to be understood, invite individual to stop outside and discuss one to one to review concern and its relationship to the best interest of the group
- Presents the concern to the group for the individual

TIMEKEEPER: Makes the facilitator/group aware of the time remaining in discussion

PUBLIC SCRIBE: Writing for group to see process

NOTETAKER: Makes written record of the content of meeting

- Post decision (if no scribe), read notes for accuracy
- Record accurately for group access

DOORKEEPER: Welcomes people, distributes literature, informs of pertinent information

TECHNIQUES

- Clarifies point of information vs. debate
- Equalizing participation
- Listening
- Stacking: organize order of speakers
- Pacing: flow of meeting
- Checking the process
- Silence
- Taking a break
- Call for consensus
- Summarizing
- Reformulating the proposal
- Stepping out of role
- Passing the clipboard: collect information
- Polling: used cautiously
- Censoring: used to control individual who breaks rules/structure by facilitator
- Expulsion: individual removed for extreme disruption

GROUP DISCUSSION TECHNIQUES

- Identification: names
- Whole group
- Small group
- Go rounds – inclusion
- Active Listening: repeat
- Caucusing: to clarify points
- Brainstorming
- Fishbowl: inner group within larger group discuss

PROCESS OF FORMAL CONSENSUS

INTRODUCTIONS

INTRODUCTION BY FACILITATOR
PROPOSAL BY PRESENTER
QUESTIONS TO CLARIFY PROPOSAL

LEVEL ONE: BROAD DISCUSSIONS

GENERAL DISCUSSION
CALL FOR CONSENSUS ——— YES ———>
NO ↓

LEVEL TWO: GROUPS OF CONCERNS

LIST ALL CONCERNS
RESOLUTION OF CONCERNS
CALL FOR CONSENSUS ——— YES ———>
NO ↓

LEVEL THREE: INDIVIDUAL CONCERNS

RESTATE EACH CONCERN
QUESTIONS TO CLARIFY CONCERN
DISCUSS THE CONCERN
EACH CONCERN RESOLVED??
CALL FOR CONSENSUS ——— YES ———>
NO ↓
WITHDRAW CONCERN/STAND ASIDE
SEND PROPOSAL TO COMMITTEE
DECLARE THE PROPOSAL BLACKED

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