

The stages of the consensus process

There are lots of consensus models out there, some groups have developed very detailed procedures, other groups follow a more organic process. The following basic process outlines the stages that are common to most models of consensus. Although your group may not formally go through the process for each and every decision you make it's a good idea to regularly practise doing it in this way. Being familiar with the process can really help when it comes to difficult or complex decisions.

This model will work well in groups up to about 15-20 people. With groups larger than that extra steps need to be built in to ensure that everyone is able to participate fully. Have a look at the section on *Consensus in large groups* below to see how this basic model can be adapted to work for groups of hundreds and even thousands of people.

Step 1: Introduce and clarify the issue(s) to be decided

Share relevant information. Work out what the key questions are.

Step 2: Explore the issue and look for ideas

1. Gather initial thoughts and reactions. What are the **issues** and **concerns**?
2. Collect **ideas** for solving the problem – write them down.
3. Have a **broad ranging discussion** and debate the ideas:
 - ★ What are the pros and cons?
 - ★ Start to think about solutions to the concerns.
 - ★ Eliminate some ideas, short list others.

Step 3: Look for emerging proposals

Is there one idea, or a series of ideas, that brings together the best qualities of the ideas discussed? Look for a solution that everyone might agree on and create a proposal.

Step 4: Discuss, clarify and amend your proposal

Ensure that any remaining concerns are heard and that everyone has a chance to
Look for **amendments** that make the proposal even more acceptable to the group.

Step 5: Test for agreement

Do you have agreement? Check for the following:

Blocks: I have a fundamental disagreement with the core of the proposal that cannot be resolved. We need to look for a new

Stand asides: I can't support this proposal because ... but I don't want to stop the group, so I'll let the decision happen without

Reservations: I have some reservations but am willing to let the proposal pass.

Agreement: I support the proposal and am willing to help implement it.

Consensus: No blocks, not too many stand asides or reservations?
Active agreement?

Then we have a decision!



Step 6: Implement the decision

Who, when, how? Action point the various tasks, set deadlines etc.

Step 1: Introduce and clarify the issue

This first stage is crucial to get you off to a good start. A good introduction will focus the meeting, ensure that everyone is talking about the same issue and provide everyone with all relevant information needed to make a decision. Spending a bit more time now to get everyone up to speed will save lots of time later.

Explain what the issue is and why it needs to be discussed. This could be done by the facilitator, the person who is raising the issue or by someone who knows a lot about the issue and its background.

Share all relevant information. If possible prepare a summary of the relevant information and circulate in advance so that people have a chance to read up and think about the issue.

Agree the aims of the discussion: *What decisions need to be made by when? Who needs to be involved in making the decision? What are the key questions? Can you break complex issues into*

smaller chunks to tackle one by one? Do all the decisions need to be made today? Does everyone need to be involved or can the issue be delegated to a working group? Could you decide the basics and leave the fine details to be worked out by a couple of people?

Allow plenty of time for questions and clarifications. Don't assume that everything is crystal clear, just because it's obvious to you. Equally, if you are confused yourself, now is the time to ask for more information or explanations.

Step 2: Explore the issue and look for ideas

Now it's time for everyone to really try to understand the issue, to express what they want and need to happen and to come up with lots of ideas for solving the problems.

1. Gather initial thoughts and reactions.

Start by giving people time to think about the issue and to express any wishes and concerns that it brings up. Make a note of these as they'll need to be addressed for a solution to be found. Resist the temptation to jump straight in with a proposal – to achieve consensus we first of all need to have a good understanding of everyone's concerns and limitations. Be honest about your own feelings and listen carefully to what everyone else is saying. At times it can be difficult to say what it is you want and don't want so if you're struggling to express things say so rather than staying quiet. Equally, if you don't quite understand someone else's position, ask for clarification.

2. Collect ideas for solving the problem.

Use techniques such as go-rounds, ideastorms or breaking into small groups to generate lots of ideas for solving the problem. Be clear that at this stage they are only ideas, not proposals. When bringing up ideas take into account the concerns you've heard. For example, if someone has said that they aren't able to get to a venue because of the poor transport links to that part of town, don't suggest another venue in the same area.

3. Have a broad ranging discussion about the ideas.

Consensus is a creative thinking process that thrives on mixing up lots of different ideas. Make time for a broad ranging discussion, where you can explore ideas and look at the pros and cons and any concerns they bring up. This will often spark new and surprising ideas. Express your reservations about ideas early on so that they can be dealt with. Draw on all the experience, knowledge and wisdom present in your group. Make sure that everyone is heard.



Step 3: Look for emerging proposals

After discussing the issue freely move on to finding agreement on what needs to be done.

This stage is also called synthesis, which means coming up with a proposal by combining elements from several different ideas.

Start with a summary of where you think the group and its different members are at. Outline the emerging common ground as well as the unresolved differences: “It seems like we’ve almost reached agreement on that element, but we need to explore this part further to address everyone’s concerns.” It’s important to not only pick up on clear differences, but also on more subtle agreement or disagreement.

Now **start building a proposal** from whatever agreement there is. Look for ideas on how the differences can be resolved. Focus on solutions that address the fundamental needs and key concerns that people within the group have. Often people are willing to give way on some things but not on others which affect them more closely. The solution will often be found by combining elements from different proposals.

It can really help to **use a flipchart or a whiteboard** to write up the areas of agreement and issues to be resolved. This means everyone can see what’s happening and it focusses the discussion.

People often argue over small details and overlook the fact that they agree on the big picture.

Making this obvious to the group can help to provide ways forward.

Even when there is strong disagreement within the group, synthesis can help move the discussion on. Always try and find some common ground, no matter how small: “So we’re all agreed that climate change demands urgent action, even if we disagree on whether the solution lies in developing new technologies, or reducing consumption”. This can reinforce that we’re all on the same side, and remind a group of their overall shared aims – a necessary condition for consensus.

Also synthesising a solution doesn’t necessarily mean uniformity or unanimity. Sometimes a solution is staring us in the face, but our desire to get full agreement becomes an obstacle: “So we’re all agreed we’d like to go ahead with the protest. However some feel strongly that the target of our protest should be government, and others feel it ought to be corporations – is there any reason why we have to choose between the two? Could we not agree that both can happen?”

Step 4: Discuss, clarify and amend your proposal

Check whether people have concerns about the proposal and look for amendments that make the proposal more acceptable to everyone. Do things like go-rounds and straw polls to gauge support for the proposal and to elicit amendments. If it becomes obvious at this stage that some people have strong reservations, see whether you can come up with a different, better option. Remember, consensus is about finding solutions that work for everyone. Be careful not to get carried away because most people like the proposal. Watch out for people who are quiet or looking unhappy and check with them. Give people time to get their head around the proposal and what it means for them. If it’s a complex or emotional issue then build in some time for reflection or a break before moving on to testing for agreement.

Step 5: Test for agreement

1. Clearly state the proposal: it's best if people can see it written up, for example on a large piece of paper.

2. Check for clarifications: does everyone fully understand what is being proposed? Does everyone understand the same thing?

3. Ask whether anyone has reservations or objections: ideally the consensus decision making process should identify and address concerns and reservations at an early stage. However, proposals do not always get whole hearted support from everyone, and less confident group members may find it hard to express their disagreement. It is important therefore to explicitly check if anyone is unhappy with a proposal at this stage.

Within consensus there are several ways of expressing disagreement. The first two, declaring reservations and standing aside, provide a way to express concerns, whilst allowing the group to proceed with the decision. The block stops the proposal.

Declaring reservations: *I still have problems with the proposal, but I'll go along with it.*

You are willing to let the proposal pass but want to register your concerns. You may even put energy into implementing the idea once your dissent has been acknowledged. If there are significant reservations the group may amend or reword the proposal.

Standing aside: *I can't support this proposal because... but I don't want to stop the group, so I'll let the decision happen without me and I won't be part of implementing it.*

You might stand aside because you disagree with the proposal: *"I'm unhappy enough with this decision not to put any effort into making it a reality, but if the rest of you want to go ahead, I won't stop you."* In this case the person standing aside is not responsible for the consequences. This should be recorded in the minutes.

Sometimes standing aside can be more pragmatic. You might like the decision but be unable

Step 6: Implement the decision

Once you've agreed what you want to do, you need to work out who will do what and by when. Share out the tasks among the group and record these action points in the minutes for the meeting.

to support it because of time restraints or personal energy levels. *"I'm OK with the decision, but I'm not going to be around next week to make it happen."*

The group may be happy to accept the stand aside and go ahead. Or the group might decide to work on a new proposal, especially where there are several stand asides.

Blocking: *I have a fundamental disagreement with the core of the proposal that cannot be resolved. We need to look for a new proposal.*

A block always stops a proposal from being agreed. It expresses a fundamental objection. It means that you cannot live with the proposal. This isn't an "I don't really like it" or "I liked the other idea better." It means "I fundamentally object to this proposal, and here is why...!" **If the group accepts the proposal either you or others will struggle to stay part of the group.** The group can either accept the block and immediately look for another proposal, or look for amendments to overcome the objection.



The block is a powerful tool and should be used with caution. Ideally strong concerns will be heard early enough in the discussion to feed into in the synthesised proposal and a block will be unnecessary.

Make sure that everyone understands the different options for expressing disagreement. Often people are confused and block when they would actually be happy to stand aside. Sometimes people are scared of blocking even though they are deeply unhappy and use a milder form of disagreement instead. Ask people what their problems with the proposal are, and whether they have suggestions for how they could be addressed.

4. Check for active agreement.

If there are no blocks, check for active agreement from everyone. People often show they agree by waving their hands, but watch out for silence or inaction and check for the reasons.