

# Consensus Decision-Making



## Building Consensus

Consensus decision-making is a process in which a group or team arrives at a decision that all can support. All members, including the leader, have an equal share or stake in the decision and have the ability to support or block the decision. This method of decision-making leads to better solutions, greater team buy-in, and builds more productive and cohesive teams.

### Why it matters:

*Building consensus helps to gain people's commitment to achieving the organizational goals by involving them in the decisions that affect their daily work life. Team members also benefit from this process because they build stronger workplace relationships where they seek to understand the viewpoints of one another—leading to a truly synergistic team.*

## Advantages and Disadvantages

There are many advantages to using consensus when making a decision. Team members often have a high level of support for the decision because they helped determine it. Using consensus also means that new ideas are shared and may lead to a solution or decision that is better than what was originally being considered. Lastly, quicker implementation of the decision may occur because people are already up and running on the issues at hand.

While there are many advantages to this type of decision-making there are also some possible disadvantages that leaders need to consider. It may take more time to reach a decision because you need to hear everyone's ideas and input. Team members may not have the collaborative skills needed to reach agreement; therefore, they may not be

willing to reach a solution everyone can support. And, people may interpret the leader's choice of consensus approach as weakness.

## When to Use and Not Use Consensus

Leaders should determine when the use of consensus is appropriate. Here are some guidelines to consider when determining which type of decision-making process to use. Consensus may not be the most logical approach when:

- The decision has already been made, but there is a desire to create the appearance of participation
- Making the decision quickly is more important than garnering support for the solution
- The decision is just not important enough to warrant the time and energy consensus requires

It may be the most logical and sensible approach if:

- A high-stakes decision must be made that, if not done well, will hurt your team or organization
- You won't be able to implement a decision unless there is strong support and cooperation from those who need to implement it
- No one person or group has the exclusive knowledge and/or authority to make the decision

## The Leader's Role

The leader's role in consensus is to ensure everyone provides input and shares his/her opinion. Some employees tend to be more assertive and speak out more easily. It's important to elicit each person's opinion, especially those who tend to be passive or less vocal. Silence does not mean agreement and in order to achieve the benefits of true consensus it's important to hear from everyone involved in making the decision.

Once you've decided to use consensus, explain exactly what consensus means in the given situation and why you've chosen it. Clearly outline constraints, including time and financial limitations and identify a fallback method if consensus can't be reached within the specified time period. This may mean that as the leader you make the final decision based on the input from the team.

As the leader you must also be comfortable with conflict. Consensus encourages conflict; it encourages your team members to openly disagree with one another. Conflict is not something to be avoided and can often produce better results. Consensus works better in an environment where healthy conflict is encouraged and supported.

Constructive conflict requires the team to cultivate the habit of focusing disagreement on “ideas not identity.” That is, our disagreement is about the ideas; it’s not personal. The leader needs to model this way of giving and receiving feedback without taking things personally.

## Consensus in Action

Let’s review the steps for consensus decision-making:

- Frame the problem, situation, or issue
  - Describe and define the decision to be made, including why you’ve chosen to use consensus. Also discuss the requirements, constraints, and parameters of the decision to be made.
- Have an open discussion
  - Encourage people to share their thoughts and opinions. Help team members understand the viewpoints of others—encourage them to ask questions and voice any concerns they may have.
- Create a list of possible solutions or ideas
  - Sometimes additional data gathering may be needed to show the feasibility of an idea. It also may be necessary to allow people time to reflect on the proposed solutions and ideas. A follow-up meeting may be required to discuss the data gathering or address any questions or concerns.
- Make the decision
  - This is the time to call for consensus. As a team, determine the solution that each team member can fully support. Ask people specifically, “Do you believe this is the best decision we can arrive at for the organization at this time and will you support its implementation?” If someone is blocking the decision, it is appropriate to ask why; you’ll want to find out their concerns and what would need to change in order for them to support the decision.
- Implement the decision
  - You’ve reached a decision, now take action. Work with your team on creating an implementation plan.

## Summary

Consensus is about creating a collaborative workplace where new ideas can lead to better decisions. By using this method, you get everyone on the team involved in developing a solution that all can support. This is a powerful tool that fosters creativity and leads to more productive and committed teams.

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