Consensus Decision-Making Guide

Group/Organization: [Your Group Name]
Adopted: [Date]
Version: [Version Number]

1. What is Consensus?

Consensus is a cooperative decision-making process where all members work together to find solutions that everyone can support—or at least live with. It's not about everyone getting their first choice, but about finding the best decision for the group as a whole.

Consensus is NOT:

- ❌ Unanimity (everyone's first choice)
- ❌ Majority rule (51% wins)
- ❌ Compromise (meeting in the middle and no one is satisfied)
- ❌ Everyone getting their way

Consensus IS:

- ✅ Everyone can live with the decision
- ✅ No one feels their fundamental concerns are ignored
- ✅ The group's wisdom is greater than any individual's
- ✅ We move forward together

2. Core Principles

Participation

- All voices are heard and valued
- Everyone shares responsibility for decisions

- Active listening is practiced

Trust

- Assume good intentions
- Share power and authority
- Support each other in learning

Respect

- Honor different perspectives
- Avoid personal attacks
- Make space for quiet voices

Commitment

- Invest time in the process
- Follow through on decisions
- Support decisions even if not your preference

3. When to Use Consensus

Well-Suited For:

- Major decisions affecting the whole group
- Value-based or philosophical questions
- Issues requiring strong buy-in
- Decisions that need diverse perspectives
- Long-term commitments

Not Always Necessary For:

- Routine operational tasks

- Time-sensitive emergencies

- Implementation details (once direction is set)

- Individual delegated authority areas

- [Add your group's specific contexts]

4. Roles in Consensus

Facilitator

Responsibilities:

- Keep discussion focused and on track

- Ensure all voices are heard

- Monitor time and energy

- Test for consensus

- Remain neutral on content

Rotation: [How your group rotates facilitation]

Notetaker

Responsibilities:

- Document proposals and key points

- Record concerns and amendments

- Capture final decision

- Distribute notes afterward

Timekeeper

Responsibilities:

- Monitor allocated time for agenda items

- Give warnings: "10 minutes left"

- Help group stay on schedule

Vibes Watcher

Responsibilities:

- Monitor group energy and dynamics
- Call for breaks when needed
- Notice who's not speaking
- Alert to building tension

5. The Consensus Process

Step 1: Introduction

- State the issue clearly
- Provide background/context
- Share why decision is needed
- Clarify scope (what we're deciding)

Time: [5-10 minutes]

Step 2: Clarifying Questions

- Questions for understanding only (not opinions yet)
- "What do you mean by...?"
- "Can you explain...?"
- "Is this included...?"

Purpose: Ensure everyone understands the same thing
Time: [10-15 minutes]

Step 3: Initial Discussion

- Share perspectives, concerns, and ideas
- **Go-around:** Each person speaks once before anyone speaks twice
- Use "I" statements
- Build on others' ideas

- Listen deeply

Purpose: Explore the full landscape of the issue
Time: [20-40 minutes depending on complexity]

Step 4: Proposal Formation

- Someone synthesizes discussion into a concrete proposal

- Or small group drafts proposal

- Proposal stated clearly in actionable terms

- Written where all can see

Purpose: Create something concrete to respond to
Time: [5-10 minutes]

Step 5: Reactions and Concerns

- What works? What doesn't?

- Specific concerns, not speeches

- Focus on how proposal could be improved

- Record all concerns

Purpose: Surface obstacles to consensus
Time: [15-30 minutes]

Step 6: Amendments

- Modify proposal to address concerns

- May require creative problem-solving

- Multiple rounds if needed

- Amended proposal clearly stated

Purpose: Refine toward something all can support
Time: [Variable]

Step 7: Testing for Consensus

Facilitator asks: **"Can everyone live with this proposal?"**

Members respond using [hand signals / color cards / verbal responses]:

Support Levels:

1. **Strong Agreement** 👍

   - "This is great, I fully support it"

2. **Agreement** ✋

   - "This works for me"

3. **Acceptance** 👌

   - "I can live with this"

   - Not my preference but I'll support it

4. **Stand Aside** ✋

   - "I can't support this, but won't block"

   - Record my disagreement but let group proceed

   - I won't help implement

5. **Block** 🛑

   - "This violates our core values/principles"

   - "This would cause serious harm"

   - I cannot consent to the group doing this

Step 8: If Consensus is Not Reached

- Identify remaining concerns

- Return to amendments OR

- Table for more information OR

- Call for break to cool down OR

- Use fallback process (see Section 7)

Step 9: Recording Decision

- Document final decision precisely

- Note any stand-asides

- Assign implementation tasks

- Set review date if appropriate

6. Understanding Blocks

What is a Block?

A block is a serious objection that prevents consensus. It's the strongest tool in consensus and should be used sparingly and carefully.

Valid Reasons to Block:

- ✅ Decision violates group's core values/mission

- ✅ Decision would cause significant harm

- ✅ Decision is outside group's purpose/authority

- ✅ Insufficient information for such a major decision

- ✅ Decision contradicts previously agreed principles

NOT Valid Reasons to Block:

- ❌ Personal preference

- ❌ Not getting my way

- ❌ Disagreement on strategy (if values aren't violated)

- ❌ Fear of change (without concrete concerns)

If Someone Blocks:

1. **Listen deeply** to the blocker's concerns

2. **Ask clarifying questions**

3. **Assess** if it's a principled block

4. **Problem-solve** to address concern

5. **If unresolvable:** Use fallback process

Group Rights:

If a block seems inappropriate, group can:

- Request blocker explain how decision violates principles

- Discuss if concern could be addressed differently

- [In severe cases: Override block with supermajority]

- [Your group's specific fallback]

7. Fallback Processes

When consensus cannot be reached, we use: [Choose and adapt]

Option A: Modified Consensus

- 80-90% agreement required

- Those with concerns stand aside

- Their concerns are recorded

Option B: Supermajority Vote

- Require [75% / 80% / 85%] agreement

- Use only after genuine attempt at consensus

- Document minority concerns

Option C: Delay and Delegate

- Table decision for more information

- Delegate to working group to research

- Return to full group with recommendation

Option D: Escalation

- Bring to larger body if applicable

- Seek external mediation

- [Your organization's specific process]

8. Tips for Effective Consensus

For Facilitators:

- Summarize frequently: "What I'm hearing is..."

- Ask specific questions: "Maria, does this address your concern?"

- Notice: "I notice we're going in circles..."

- Offer process options: "Should we take a break?"

- Stay neutral on content

For Participants:

- **Speak concisely:** Make your point then yield

- **Listen actively:** Don't plan your response while others speak

- **Build on ideas:** "Yes, and..." rather than "but"

- **Be flexible:** Hold your opinions lightly

- **Trust the process:** Resist urge to rush

For Everyone:

- **Come prepared:** Read materials beforehand

- **Start on time:** Respect everyone's time

- **Stay present:** Minimize distractions

- **Use breaks:** Step away when needed

- **Check assumptions:** Ask rather than assume

9. Common Challenges

Challenge: One Person Dominates

Solutions:

- Use go-arounds for structured turn-taking
- "Let's hear from people who haven't spoken yet"
- Stack speakers (queue)
- Time limits per speaker

Challenge: Silence/Lack of Input

Solutions:

- Small group discussions first
- Written responses before verbal
- Direct invitation: "Lee, what's your take?"
- Create safer space for quiet voices

Challenge: Going in Circles

Solutions:

- Facilitator summarizes areas of agreement
- Focus on what's different in current points
- Take a break
- Move to proposal stage

Challenge: Hidden Disagreement

Solutions:

- Create space for concerns
- Private check-ins
- Anonymous written concerns

- "Is there anything unsaid?"

Challenge: Decision Fatigue

Solutions:

- Prioritize decisions
- Delegate when possible
- Schedule shorter meetings
- Use consent for minor items (see below)

10. Consent vs. Consensus

Consensus: Do we all support this?
Consent: Does anyone have a *principled objection* to this?

When to Use Consent:

- Operational decisions
- Policy implementation
- Time-sensitive choices
- Low-stakes decisions

Consent Process:

1. Present proposal
2. Clarifying questions
3. Quick reactions
4. Ask: "Any principled objections?"
5. If none → decided
6. If yes → address objections

11. Cultural Considerations

Power Dynamics

- Notice whose voices are centered
- Create space for marginalized perspectives
- Name power differences when relevant
- Adjust process to ensure equity

Communication Styles

- Not everyone processes verbally in groups
- Allow written input
- Respect different cultural norms
- Adapt for neurodiversity

Time and Pacing

- Not everyone needs same processing time
- Some cultures value thorough discussion
- Balance efficiency with inclusion

12. Review and Adaptation

Evaluating Our Process

Regularly assess (quarterly/annually):

- What's working well?
- What's frustrating?
- Are all voices truly heard?
- How can we improve?

Amending This Guide

- This guide itself can be modified by [your process]

- Suggestions welcomed from all members

- Review date: [Date]

Appendix A: Hand Signals

Visual consensus indicators [Optional, adapt to your group]

- 👍 **Thumbs up:** Strong support

- ✋ **Flat hand:** Neutral support / can live with it

- 👌 **Okay sign:** Mild acceptance

- 🤚 **Hand out:** Stand aside

- ✊ **Fist:** Block

- 👋 **Wave:** Direct response (not new point)

- ☝️ **Point up:** Clarifying question

- 🙋 **Raised hand:** Want to speak

Appendix B: Sample Agenda Template

[Group Name] Meeting
Date: [Date]
Time: [Start - End]
Facilitator: [Name]
Notetaker: [Name]

1. **Opening/Check-in** [10 min]

2. **Review Agenda** [5 min]

   - Additions/changes?

   - Time allocation

3. **Announcements** [10 min]

4. **Decision Item 1:** [Title] [30 min]

  - Background

  - Discussion

  - Proposal

  - Test for consensus

5. **[Additional items]**

6. **Tasks/Assignments** [5 min]

7. **Next Meeting** [5 min]

8. **Closing/Appreciation** [5 min]