Building Consensus
A Brief Introduction

The following definition of Consensus was written by Valley Diagnostic and Surgical Clinic of Harlingen Texas as part of a Community Building Workshop.

> *Consensus is a group decision (which some members may not feel is the best decision, but which they can all live with, support and commit themselves to not undermine), arrived at without voting, through a process whereby the issues are fully aired, all members feel they have been adequately heard, in which everyone has equal power and responsibility, and different degrees of influence by virtue of individual stubbornness or charisma are avoided so that all are satisfied with the process.*
>
> *The process requires the members to be emotionally present and engaged, frank in a loving, mutually respectful manner, sensitive to each other; to be selfless, dispassionate, and capable of emptying themselves and possessing a paradoxical awareness of precariousness of both people and time (including knowing when the solution is satisfactory, and that it is time to stop and not reopen the discussion until such time as the group determines a need for revision).*

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– M. Scott Peck, MD
A World Waiting To Be Born

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Introduction

Despite its immense popularity during the shift toward egalitarian organizations in the 1970s and 1980s, few business or community leaders today have an appreciable understanding of Consensus in its true form – and fewer still who practice it in the groups they are members of. If they're familiar with the term, most understand Consensus as a condition rather than as a method – i.e., as being in agreement rather than building agreement. If they're aware of it as a method, they probably think of it as the free-spirited alternative to Roberts Rules of Order. And if they know anything more, it probably has something to do with its reputation for being tedious, taking too long, and reducing groups to their lowest common denominator.

Consensus has certainly let down many groups over the years. However when it has, it usually says more about the group than it does about the method. For consensus to work well, it must fit the situation. It works best in expressive environments which fundamentally value and promote trust, mutuality, and power sharing. Not every group exists in an environment like this. Nor does every group needs to. However for those which do, Consensus can be an extremely effective way to develop more creative and more widely supported agreements than is usually possible with conventional decision-making techniques. And in the process, it increases the expressiveness of groups, deepens the appreciation

members have of each other's viewpoints and experiences, and over the long term, builds more stable and productive teams.

What is Consensus

At the most basic level, Consensus is a method of reaching decisions by which stakeholders have the abiding sense that their concerns have been heard and fully addressed. It's not an agreement where everyone agrees in the same way. This would be conformity not Consensus. Consensus fosters individual differences in the same way that Community Building does – where members of a group are able to accept and transcend what separates them in order to communicate openly and effectively as they pursue a common purpose. This makes Consensus an ideal way for groups to make decisions when they are also practicing the principles of Community Building.

Not Everything Needs Consensus

When a group commits to using Consensus, it's not committing to make every decision by Consensus. Groups can empower individuals, small representative teams, or large bodies to make decisions for them. There may also be times when a group must make a decision without being able to adequately address a concern. Members may actually call for a vote. This is referred to as "Consensus minus one" and may happen when circumstances have created a crisis and a decision is imperative.

However a decision might be made by a group practicing Consensus, there is a steadfast commitment to including, in some meaningful way, those who are impacted by it – the stakeholders. And there is a corresponding commitment to invest as much time is necessary to create a safe enough space where their concerns can be honestly expressed and fully addressed. In general, Consensus strives to reach an agreement that everyone can live with and support – or at least not undermine.

Other matters which don't usually require Consensus include: logistics, announcements, reports, delegated decisions, process evaluations, and open discussions. The focus of Consensus is mainly on problems and proposals.

An Approach to First Meetings

The following approach is common for ad hoc groups which may have come together for a limited period to work on a single project. It is also common to organize the context and the first agenda for a regular, recurring meeting.

PREPARATION
1. Clarify the problem or purpose
2. Identify stakeholders, determine group size, and select participants
3. Determine frequency or cycle of meetings and the life span of group
4. Assess suitability of Consensus for the group and its problem or purpose
5. Design the process or approach for building Consensus
6. Develop and agree on ground rules and other protocols and procedures

7. Agree on meeting logistics and roles
8. Prepare participants

MEETING

1. Introductions (especially with new groups and changing membership)
2. Identify and agree on the definition of the problem or purpose
3. Clarify and agree on ground rules for meeting participation
4. Build agreement on the process steps and activities to address the problem or pursue the purpose
5. Invest time to understand the context, key issues, and the concerns of respective participants
6. Generate options before attempting to reach agreements
7. Reach agreement through the process steps previously agreed to
8. Evaluate process

IMPLEMENTATION

1. Establish an implementation plan
2. Seek ratification by constituencies
3. Incorporate monitoring & reopening procedures
4. Focus on long-term relationship & resistance
5. Invest in organizational learning & development

Preconditions for Consensus

In their comprehensive "The Consensus Building Handbook," Lawrence Susskind, Sarah McKearnan, and Jennifer Thomas-Larmer identify four preconditions that must be met for Consensus to be a viable decision-making method for a group:

1. Technical expertise and support
2. A formal commitment through a written covenant or charter
3. Enough time to build internal capacity
4. Clear instructions

Common Meeting Elements

PRESENT PROBLEM OR PROPOSAL

The presenter reads his or her written proposal aloud, provides background information, explains its benefits, and addresses any anticipated concerns. If the proposal is not written, depending on the seriousness of the matter, the group may decide to postpone discussion until a written proposal has been developed by the presenter or a committee.

QUESTIONS TO CLARIFY THE PRESENTATION

Questions are asked of the presenter to understand better the presentation and what is being asked of the group. This is not a time for comments or concerns. If there are only a few questions, they can be

answered one at a time by the person presenting the proposal. If there are many, a useful technique is hearing all the questions first, then answering them together.

IDENTIFY CONCERNS

Concerns are identified and written down publicly by the scribe and for the record by the notetaker. The scribe strives to be as accurate as possible by checking with the person who voiced the concern before moving on. This is not a time to attempt to resolve concerns or determine their validity. The facilitator should interrupt any comments which attempt to defend the proposal, resolve the concerns, judge the value of the concerns, or in any way deny or dismiss another's feelings of doubt or concern.

CLARIFY THE CONCERN

Addressing one concern at a time, the facilitator restates the concern, asks for any questions or comments which would further clarify it before beginning the discussion.

DISCUSSION

Use as many creative group discussion techniques as needed to facilitate a resolution for each concern.

DISCUSSION

This is a time to think about the proposal broadly and some of the general problems. If there seems to be general approval of the proposal, the facilitator, or someone recognized to speak, can request a call for consensus. Otherwise, comments should take the whole proposal into account and focus on why it might be good for the group in the broadest sense. Concerns are noted but not addressed.

CALL FOR CONSENSUS

The facilitator asks, "Are there any unresolved concerns?" or "Are there any concerns remaining?" After a period of silence, if no additional concerns are raised, the facilitator declares that consensus is reached and the proposal is read for the record. At this point, the facilitator assigns task responsibilities or sends the decision to a committee for implementation.

CLOSING OPTIONS

1. Send to Committee – If a decision is needed before the next meeting, a smaller group can be empowered to make the decision for the larger group. Such a committee should include all points of view.
2. Stand Aside – When a concern has been fully discussed and cannot be resolved, it is appropriate for the facilitator to ask those persons with this concern if they are willing to stand aside; that is, acknowledge that the concern still exists, but allow the proposal to be adopted.
3. Declare Block – If Consensus cannot be reached, the proposal is blocked and the meeting moves on to the next agenda item.

Standing Agreements

The following standing Agreements are common for groups that use Consensus routinely.

1. Once a decision has been adopted by Consensus, it can only be modified by new Consensus.
2. Only one person has permission to speak at any moment.
3. The role of Peacekeeper is exempt from this "one-mic" rule.
4. Roles are filled by consensus without debate. Any objection automatically causes a new selection. If a role cannot be filled without objection, the group proceeds without that role being filled.
5. Content decisions (i.e., the agenda contract, committee reports, proposals, etc.) are reached by consensus after discussion. Every content decision must be openly discussed before it can be tested for consensus.
6. Concerns must be based upon the principles of the group to justify a block to consensus.
7. Every meeting should have an evaluation.

Group Roles

Roles in Consensus meetings are not elected positions. They are responsibilities to the group and may change as often as the group likes – even after each meeting. These roles help to address interpersonal, procedural, and process needs. Group may use other or additional roles based on their needs.

FACILITATOR (OR CHAIR)

The Facilitator advances the agenda while encouraging member participation. He or she may solicit agenda items in advance and otherwise prepare group members for participation.

SCRIBE

The Scribe writes information for the whole group to see on a whiteboard or flipchart – such as concerns and agreements. Legibility is important – but accuracy is the goal. And to that end, the Scribe should check frequently with group members to make sure that what he or she has written is exactly correct.

NOTE-TAKER

The Note-taker records the meeting minutes, including the date, agenda, who was present, the outcome of any agreements, and the salient content of discussions.

TIME-KEEPER:

The Time-keeper watches the clock to prevent agenda items from exceeding the allotted time. If discussions run over, the time-keeper may ask the group ito extend or table the discussion.

PEACEKEEPER

The Peacekeeper is most useful in large groups or when very controversial topics are being discussed. When a group agrees to fill this role, a person should be selected who can remain

neutral on the topic or who is able to emotionally separate him or herself from the discussion. The Peacekeeper pays attention to the overall mood or tone of the meeting. When tensions increase, he or she interrupts briefly to remind the group of its common purpose and of its mutual commitment to civility. This might be accomplished with a simple call for a moment of silence. His or her comments are always directed at the group as a whole, never at one individual – and should be simple acknowledgements or instructions, never teaching opportunities. The peacekeeper is the only person with prior permission to interrupt.

Consensus Method

Formal Consensus is presented in levels or cycles as follows: (1) clarify the proposal, (2) discuss perspectives, (3) identify concerns – not resolve them, (4) resolve concerns, and (5) alternative methods for reaching agreements.

Method

Clarify
- Present the problem/proposal
- Questions to clarify the problem

Discuss
- Group discussion
- Specify the agreement
- Call for Consensus (Agree/Consent)
- Continue if concerns are raised

Identify Concerns
- List all concerns
- Group related concerns, if there are a lot
- Resolve concerns/groups at a time

Resolve Concerns
- Questions to clarify concern/group
- Group Discussion
- Modify agreement
- Call for Consensus (Agree/Consent)

Alternatve Closings
- Send to committee
- Stand aside
- Declare Block

Language for Facilitators

[Name], will you present the [agenda item]? We have agreed to spend [time period] on it.

Are there any questions for [name] to clarify his/her presentation?

If there are no more questions, the group is open for discussion for the next [time period].

Are there any concerns remaining?

[Use silence to create space for those who have not spoken]

Hearing no more concerns, we have Consensus on [agenda item] to [Agreement]

or

Acknowledging [concern], are there any questions to clarify this concern?

Community Building

This paper has been written for people who are familiar with Community Building as developed by M. Scott Peck, MD – preferably by participating in a Community Building Workshop. The following vision, definition and guidelines are foundational to the experience:

VISION

There is a yearning in the heart for peace. Because of the wounds and rejections we have received in past relationships, we are frightened by the risks. In our fear, we discount the dream of authentic community as merely visionary. But there are rules by which people can come back together, by which the old wounds can be healed. The purpose of Community Building is to teach these rules – to make hope real again – and to make the vision actually manifest in a world which has almost forgotten the glory of what it means to be human.

DEFINITION

A Community is a group of two or more people who, regardless of the diversity of their backgrounds, have been able to accept and transcend their differences, enabling them to communicate openly and effectively, and to work together toward common goals, while having a sense of unusual safety with one another. Community Building Workshops endeavor to create this safe place.

GUIDELINES

1. Say your name before you speak.
2. Speak personally and specifically, using "I"-statements.
3. Speak when moved to speak; do not speak when not moved to speak.
4. Include others and yourself; avoid exclusivity.
5. Be emotionally present.
6. Voice displeasure or any dislikes to the entire group.
7. Commit to "hang in there."
8. Accept responsibility for the success of the group.
9. Participate verbally or non-verbally.
10. Maintain strict confidentiality.

If you have not participated in a Community Building Workshop, you can read about it in Scott Peck's seminal book on the topic *The Different Drum* – and in his later reflection on the necessary role of Community Building for advancing civility in *A World Waiting To Be Born.* However, the best way to learn about Community Building is by participating in a Community Building Workshop where you will be introduced to the principles of Community Building in a very concentrated and intensely personal way – such that you will never forget.

Quaker Perspective

The following adaptation of the Quaker model by Earlham College can be effectively applied to Consensus in just about any setting:

1. Multiple concerns and information are shared until the sense of the group is clear.
2. Discussion involves active listening and sharing information.
3. Norms limit number of times one asks to speak to ensure that each speaker is fully heard.
4. Ideas and solutions belong to the group; no names are recorded.
5. Ideally, differences are resolved by discussion. The facilitator ("clerk" or "convener" in the Quaker model) identifies areas of agreement and names disagreements to push discussion deeper.
6. The facilitator articulates the sense of the discussion, asks if there are other concerns, and proposes a "minute" of the decision.
7. The group as a whole is responsible for the decision and the decision belongs to the group.
8. The facilitator can discern if one who is not uniting with the decision is acting without concern for the group or in selfish interest.
9. Ideally, all dissenters' perspectives are synthesized into the final outcome for a whole that is greater than the sum of its parts.
10. Should some dissenter's perspective not harmonize with the others, that dissenter may "stand aside" to allow the group to proceed, or may opt to "block". "Standing aside" implies a certain form of silent consent. Some groups allow "blocking" by even a single individual to halt or postpone the entire process.

Key components of Quaker-based consensus include a belief in a common humanity and the ability to decide together. The goal is "unity, not unanimity." Ensuring that group members speak only once until others are heard encourages a diversity of thought. The facilitator is understood as serving the group rather than acting as person-in-charge. In the Quaker model, as with other consensus decision-making processes, by articulating the emerging consensus, members can be clear on the decision, and, as their views have been taken into account, are likely to support it.

Sample Agenda

The following agenda was the template used by the residents at Dismas House in Chattanooga (TN) for their weekly House Meeting. Dismas House was an intentional community of university students which served as transitional housing for state prisoners. When

PREAMBLE

The overall purpose of human communication is – or should be – reconciliation. It should ultimately serve to lower or remove the walls and barriers of misunderstand that unduly separate us human beings one from another.

– M. Scott Peck, MD

We gather in Community at Dismas House to discuss where we have come from, where we are presently, and the direction we are going. When decisions are needed, we reach them through Consensus. This does not mean that we all agree in the same way. It means that all of our concerns have been fully heard and addressed. When Consensus is not possible as a

Community, we delegate the decision to a Work Group. And if it is not possible in a Work Group, we delegate it to the House Manager.

GROUND RULES

As a Community we have established the following ground rules for our meetings:

1. Be fully present
2. Seek first to understand
3. Agreement is not required
4. Disagreement is not permission to be silent
5. Each person is responsible for the success of the group
6. Everyone has a Learners' Permit

AGENDA

Agenda Item	Presenter	Time
Silence	Facilitator	3 min
Introductions/New Members/Meeting Roles	Facilitator	3 min
Agenda/Time Agreements	Facilitator	3 min
Week in Review	Membership	12 min
Review Last Week's Notes	Note Taker	3 min
Reports	Work Groups	12 min
Proposals	Authors	27 min
Old Business	Facilitator	18 min
Announcements	Facilitator	3 min
Next Meeting	Facilitator	1 min
Review Agreements	Note Taker	1 min
Meeting Evaluation	Membership	3 min
Closing	Facilitator	1 min