

# CONSENSUS DECISION-MAKING

There are lots of ways for communities to make decisions and none of them is perfect. Many of us have been brought up in a culture of one-person, one-vote. An executive is elected by the community to take all the decisions and they return every so often to the community for another election. For many people, though, this represents an unsatisfactory handing over of their own power.

## Voting

A democratic vote can promote division and conflict because the losing minority is unhappy with the outcome. They might acknowledge the legitimacy of the decision, because they accept these rules of democracy, but may still actively resist or undermine it, and work towards the next voting opportunity.

## Compromise

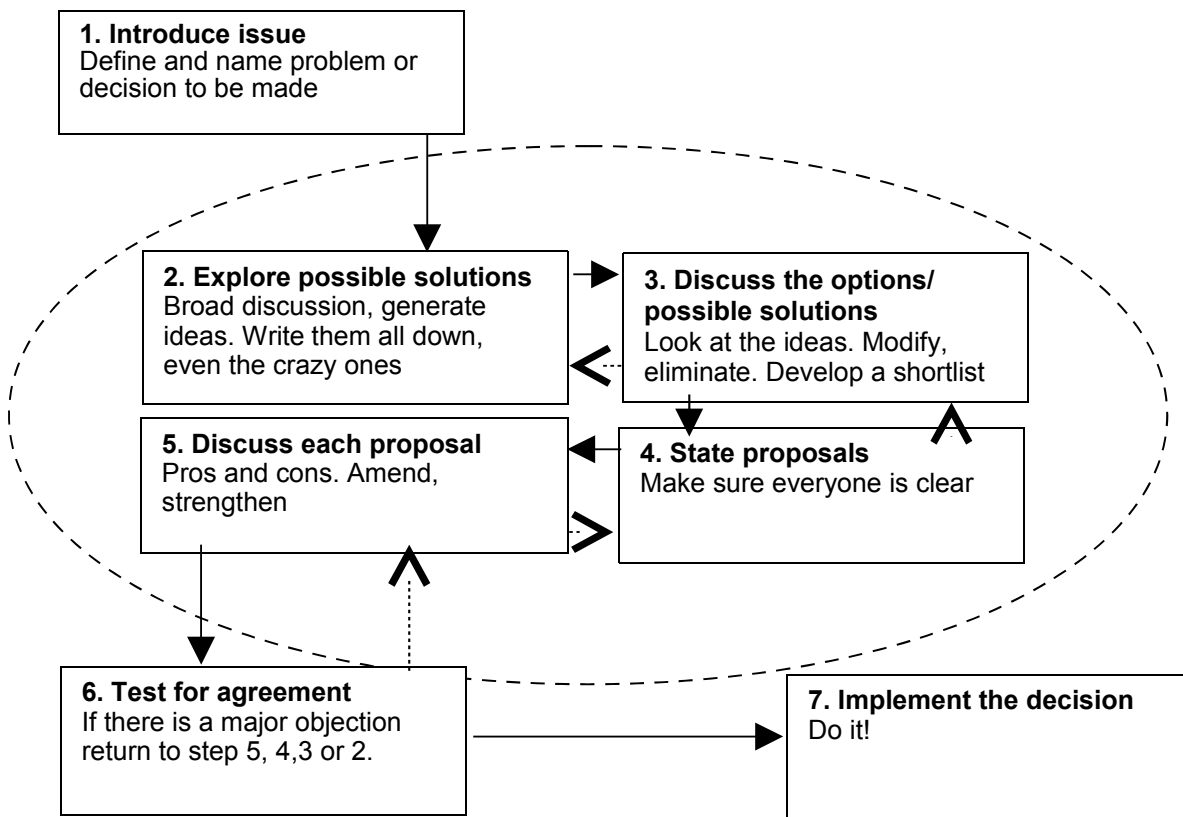
Negotiated compromise is another method of reaching a decision. Two or more sides announce their position and move towards each other with measured concessionary and mutual steps. However, this can lead to dissatisfaction on all sides, with nobody getting what they really wanted.

## Consensus

Consensus is a creative and inclusive way of reaching a decision. It's a process where everyone works to reach a decision that all can accept. Consensus, in theory, is the product of everybody's best thinking and places priority on the cohesion and stability of the group. When minority voices are listened to, the decision can often be better than that swiftly imposed by a simple majority. Consensus is often seen as slow but it can also be very effective in situations that require quick decisions.

The number one requirement for consensus is the commitment of every member of the group to make it work. All involved should come in an active, seeking spirit - not with minds already made up. Strong and impartial facilitation/chairing is also essential to keep the process focused and on track. It works like this:

1. Define and name the problem, or decision to be made. It helps to do this in a way that separates the problems/questions from personalities.
2. Explore possible solutions. Write them all down, even the crazy ones.
3. Discuss the options written down. Modify some, eliminate others, and develop a short-list. Which are the favourites?
4. State the proposals or choice of proposals so that everybody is clear.
5. Discuss the pros and cons of each proposal – make sure everybody has a chance to contribute.
6. If there is a major objection, return to step 5.
7. Sometimes you may need to return to step 4, 3 or 2.
8. If there are no major objections, state the decision and test for agreement.
9. Acknowledge minor objections and incorporate friendly amendments.
10. Discuss.
11. Check for consensus.



Consensus works best when

- the group is cohesive,
- there is sufficient information upon which to make a decision.
- the process is well facilitated.

Consensus does not work well when

- dominant personalities undermine it,
- none of the options are suitable or when the matter is trivial.

Every member of the group has an option of veto on any decision with which they cannot live with, although over-use or misuse of the veto can undermine the process. Another option is a “stand-aside” in which a member disagrees with a decision but does not want to stand in the group’s way.

For campaigning and action groups, decision-making by consensus is not only a method of reaching decisions, but also a way of building community, trust, a sense of security and mutual support – especially important in times of stress and emergency. It does require commitment, patience, and a willingness to put the group first. It is a method which becomes easier and quicker with practice and continued commitment.

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