



Making sense of consensus

In the management team form of governance, decisions are made through consensus.

Consensus may be a new decision-making process for some members of the team, one which typically requires a longer discussion period about issues and results in outcomes that typically are positive for participants.

Consensus is:

- An agreement among team members to support each other for the common good. It can be experienced only when everyone has participated in the decision-making process and can support the final decision. Consensus means that even those who do not fully agree can at least support the group decision, if only for a trial period.
- A flexible process, which often uncovers thoughts and ideas that otherwise might not surface. Through discussion, a more creative or different solution is often reached rather than the one originally conceived. Often groups find routes to agreements that no one recognized when discussion first began.
- A process that accommodates varying points of view. Consensus also means that you have a voice and can block decisions that you cannot accept. However, you must then be prepared to present a viable alternative, not just reject the ideas of others. One value of a diverse team is hearing many points of view, which can lead to better ideas. Decisions made by consensus bring people together rather than polarizing them, as voting often does.

Consensus does not mean:

- That team members are 100 percent sold on every course of action. Not only will different points of view be expressed, but more than one “right” solution may exist. In fact, total agreement on a complex issue is rare. To successfully implement any significant change, team members should be at least 70 percent comfortable with an action. Be aware that the process of reaching consensus can delay a decision.



- Saying “yes” when you really mean “no.” It is important that team members be honest and forthright in stating opinions. Giving your “real” opinion after the meeting, to friends in the parking lot, for example, defeats the team’s purpose. Lack of commitment and follow-through are almost always the result when the “no’s” are not expressed and fully discussed during team meetings.
- Majority rule that forces the minority to go along. When this happens, subtle and overt resistance may occur. Consensus decisions require a degree of discussion and interchange that doesn’t occur in voting.

Source: Sweet Adelines International Chapter Guide Section 1: Chapter Organization Page A-3

A consensus tool – *Fist to five*

Here is a technique called *fist to five*, and was developed as a way to poll team members and help achieve consensus in business teams. It’s great for quickly assessing how close or far apart the team is on an issue so the chair knows if it needs a lengthy or a short discussion, or if the consensus motion needs to be reviewed before discussion.

To use the technique, the team facilitator restates an action the group may make and asks the team to show their level of support. Each team member responds by holding up a closed fist or the number of fingers that corresponds to the level of support. If a team member holds up fewer than three fingers, she is given the opportunity to state her objections and the team may respond. The facilitator continues *the fist to five* process until the team achieves consensus (everyone holds up three or more fingers) or agrees to move on to the next issue.

- **Closed fist** - No. A closed fist is a way to block consensus.
- **1 finger** - I have major concerns.
- **2 fingers** - I would like to discuss some minor issues.
- **3 fingers** - I’m not in total agreement but I feel comfortable enough to let this proposal pass without further discussion.
- **4 fingers** - I think it’s a good idea and will work for it.
- **5 fingers** - It’s a great idea and would like to take the lead when we implement it.

Source: <http://whatis.techtarget.com/definition/fist-to-five-fist-of-five>

Powerful questions for facilitating consensus

Most issues can reach consensus through simple discussion and using a tool like *fist to five* to ensure people's beliefs and opinions can be heard and considered. Sometimes, a different way of thinking is needed to shift the discussion in a new direction.

You can defer the discussion to another date or take a break and even change the seating arrangements in the room to prompt a new energy. Either way, using powerful questions puts the responsibility on those who are blocking or have serious concerns to articulate their thoughts and look for a way through the block together. It helps open up new thinking in the whole team too and the likely outcome is a robust solution that can stand up to challenges and people can feel committed to.

These questions use the Appreciate Inquiry approach – designed to be open and not 'loaded'. We've all heard questions that only give the option to agree or disagree, or to select a response from limited options.

- What are the things in this proposal that no matter what, we want to keep?
- What question, if answered, could make the most difference to your supporting this proposal?
- What is most important to you about your concerns and why is it preventing your support of this proposal?
- What other opportunities/courses of action can you see that we could agree on?
- What assumptions do we need to test or challenge in thinking about the concerns you've raised?
- What would it take to create consensus on this issue?
- What could happen that would enable you/us to accept the proposal for the common good?
- If there was one thing that hasn't yet been said in order to reach a deeper level of understanding/clarity, what would that be?
- Have we got the best option or the one we all agree on? If our success was completely guaranteed, what bold steps might we choose?
- If we proceed with the proposal and are challenged on it, how might we meet those challenges?
- What seed might we plant together today that could make the most difference to the outcome of this proposal?

Source: Vogt, E., Brown, J., and Issacs, D. (2003). The Art of powerful questions: Catalyzing insight, innovation, and action. Whole Systems Associates: Mill Valley, CA.

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