

REACHING CONSENSUS ON CONSENSUS

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“Have we reached consensus?” is a question asked by leaders striving to get everyone involved, while still trying to get everyone to act. Often asked with a tone of frustration, it obscures another question: What do we mean by consensus? Consensus can mean many things: that every group member had an opportunity to influence the final decision; that all legitimate concerns were addressed; that the decision was one everyone can live with; substantial agreement; some specified degree of agreement; or unanimity. Wouldn't it be helpful if we could reach consensus on what we mean by consensus? To do so, let's disentangle consensus as a process from consensus as an outcome.

Consensus as an outcome

As an outcome, consensus describes the result of decision making, rather than the process or means of decision making. For example, “Consensus means that everyone in the group freely agrees with the decision and will support it. If even one person cannot agree with a proposed decision, then the group does not have consensus” (Schwarz 1989, 29). This definition of consensus describes the decision reached by the group as an outcome of its activity. A number of definitions (or descriptions) of consensus focus on outcomes, with some significant variations. Several definitions are shown below to illustrate a range of views regarding consensus as an outcome.

A decision-making process in which all parties involved explicitly agree to the final decision. Consensus decision making does not mean that all parties are completely satisfied with the final outcome, but that the decision is acceptable to all because no one feels that his or her vital interests or values are violated by it. (Auvine et al. 1978, xii).

Consensus is achieved when each of the stakeholders agrees they can live with a proposed solution, even though it may not be their most preferred solution. (Gray 1989, 25).

Consensus is a state of mutual agreement among members of a group where all legitimate concerns of individuals have been addressed to the satisfaction of the group. (Saint and Lawson 1994, xii).

Straw-poll consensus. ... After the board has had sufficient time for discussion about a particular topic, the chair asks each member to hold up fingers showing where s/he is on the levels of consensus scale show below (Bartunek and Murningham, 1984, p. 421-422).

1. absolutely no
2. no, but I could live with it
3. yes, with reservations
4. absolutely yes

Here is a more elaborate statement of “levels of consensus” (Kelsey and Plumb, 2004, p. 125):

1. I can say an unqualified “yes” to the decision. I am satisfied that the decision is an expression of the wisdom of the group.
2. I find the decision perfectly acceptable.
3. I can live with the decision; I'm not especially enthusiastic about it.
4. I do not fully agree with the decision and need to register my view about it. However, I do not choose to block the decision. I am willing to support the decision because I trust the wisdom of the group.

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5. I do not agree with the decision and feel the need to stand in the way of this decision being accepted.
6. I feel that we have no clear sense of unity in the group. We need to do more work before consensus can be reached.

All of the above descriptions of consensus have in common that they focus on consensus as an outcome; they describe the nature, circumstances and level of agreement regarding the decision that is the result of the group's activity. The following description of consensus differs from those above in that it seamlessly integrates concern for both process and outcome. A careful reading shows that while some statements focus on outcomes, most emphasize processes.

“Consensus means that every group member has an opportunity to influence the final decision. Members of the group reach substantial agreement, not necessarily unanimity. Consensus cannot be achieved by majority rule, ‘horse-trading,’ or averaging. Consensus frees the group from either/or thinking and emphasizes the possibilities of both/and thinking by focusing attention on needs and goals. In consensus seeking it is possible to achieve a solution that all members can regard as fair. When members strive for what is best for all, rather than trying to triumph over opponents, they fulfill the highest expectations of the democratic tradition.” (Bradford 1976)

Consensus as a process

As a process, consensus addresses how individuals behave toward each other (their interpersonal interactions) as well as how they think about the issues or problems at hand (their analysis and intuition). Thus, consensus is both a social and a cognitive process. In practice, the social and cognitive aspects of consensus processes are inextricable. Nonetheless, it might be useful to examine consensus processes to see if both social and cognitive aspects are evident. One way to do this is to examine the ground rules that are sometimes used by groups. Ground rules are often introduced by facilitators to make explicit their expectations regarding how a meeting should be conducted. Some would argue that ground rules, when used, should be formally adopted by the group, even if initially proposed by the facilitator. As such, these ground rules represent the group's consensus on consensus. Ground rules may address the outcomes of the group's work, but typically most relate to the processes².

Moore and Feldt (1993) propose several ground rules to help individuals work together effectively. Below, some of the rules are categorized to show that some regulate predominantly cognitive processes, while others regulate predominantly social processes.

² Definitions of consensus typically focus on outcomes, although some also address processes. Ground rules for consensus typically focus on processes, although some also address outcomes.

Ground rules that regulate predominantly cognitive processes	Ground rules that regulate predominantly social processes
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Actively listen to each other • Be specific and ensure meaningfulness • Focus on the doable • Focus on what can be done to remedy things - after the problem definition step, stop the complaining and blaming and get to what you can do. • Maintain an outcome orientation • Stay resourceful - think creatively • Accept that this meeting is just the start • Look for common ground 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Respect what others say and their points of view - recognize that no one has a monopoly on truth • No side conversations - share your thoughts • Actively participate • If you get stuck, move on - don't allow yourselves to get bogged down. • Personal attacks of any kind are not allowed • Enforcing rules is everyone's responsibility • No booze until the work is done

Following is one more example, based on ground rules developed by Schwarz (1989), that illustrates how ground rules can be viewed as addressing both cognitive and social processes.

Ground rules that regulate predominantly cognitive processes	Ground rules that regulate predominantly social processes
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Be specific: Use examples. • Explain the reasons behind your statements, questions, and actions. • Focus on interests, not positions. • Keep the discussion focused. • It is all right to discuss undiscussable issues. • Share appropriate information with nongroup members. • Test assumptions and inferences. • Agree on what important words mean. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Share all relevant information. • Don't take cheap shots or otherwise distract the group. • All members are expected to participate in all phases of the process. • It is all right to disagree openly with any member of the group. • Make statements; then invite comments about the statements. • Jointly design ways of testing disagreements and solutions. • Do self-critiques.

These ground rules focus on processes (Schwarz included one more rule, "make decisions by consensus," which focuses on outcomes). Other sets of ground rules could be cited that incorporate more extensive rules for how decision outcomes are to be achieved (for example, see Administrative Conference of the United States, 1995).

Attention to consensus as an outcome is important. It makes explicit what participants must achieve to reach decisions. It sets a standard that is higher, and yet more flexible, than majority vote. However, by itself, it provides little aid regarding how the group should conduct itself. Attention to consensus as a process is also important. It makes clear how meetings will be conducted and what kinds of behaviors are to be mutually expected. However, by itself, it leaves to question what will be required to reach decisions.

Consensus in society

In a world where social values and factual knowledge change rapidly and are influenced by diverse sources, tradition and science are insufficient means for establishing truth or providing a basis for organizational or societal action. The democratic virtue of consensus ("truth by agreement," "action by commitment") is appealing, if not compelling. Consensus

requires explicit attention to process as well as outcome, and sets high standards for both. Being aware of the range of process and outcome ground rules that are tenable, and working with a group to reach consensus on consensus, provides a valuable foundation for working on factious problems.

... what effects consensus and makes it convincing is not the agreement itself, but participation by those who arrived at it. (Moscovici and Doise 1994, p. 2).

In a democracy, the means are the ends.³

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³ Variations of this statement have been attributed to Mahatma Gandhi. Two examples follow. "[M]eans must determine ends and indeed it's questionable in human affairs whether there is an end." "They say that means are after all means. I would say that means are after all everything. As the means, so the end. ... Realization of the goal is in exact proportion to that of the means." (*Selected Writings of Mahatma Gandhi*, by Ronald Duncan and Mahatma Gandhi, Boston: Beacon, 1951, pages 14, 242.