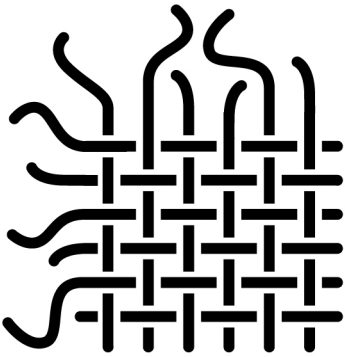# Consensus decision making

A guide to collaborative decision-making for activist groups, co-ops and communities

Contents

What is consensus

Consensus decision making is a creative and dynamic way of reaching agreement between all members of a group. Instead of simply voting for an item and having the majority of the group getting their way, a group using consensus is committed to finding solutions that everyone actively supports, or at least can live with. This ensures that all opinions, ideas and concerns are taken into account. Through listening closely to each other, the group aims to come up with proposals that work for everyone.

By definition, in consensus no decision is made against the will of an individual or a minority. If significant concerns remain unresolved, a proposal can be blocked and prevented from going ahead. This means that the whole group has to work hard at finding solutions that address everyone's concerns rather than ignoring or overruling minority opinions.

Consensus is used widely by people around the world working towards a more just and equitable society: from small voluntary groups, co-operatives and campaign networks to businesses, local communities and, in some cultures, across much wider regions. The exact process may differ depending on the size of the group and other factors, but the basic principle of co-operation between equals remains the same.

In this guide you'll find lots of information to help you make decisions using consensus, including why you might use it, the basic principles and process, how to apply it to larger groups of people and ideas for dealing with common problems. We also have a *Short guide to consensus*, and our guide *Facilitating meetings* contains lots of tips for making your consensus meetings run smoothly.

Why use consensus?

Many of us experience very little control over our lives in the wider world, with decisions being made for us by managers, benefits agencies, the police, politicians. The rewards this system promises are mostly about mobility *within* the hierarchy: getting a promotion, buying status by owning different stuff. And we're encouraged to compete with each other and scapegoat whoever is beneath us in the pile, instead of questioning why there isn't enough to go round in the first place.

Using consensus gives us a taste of how things could be done differently. It aims to dismantle all kind of hierarchy, and replace it with **shared power**. It is based on the values of **equality, freedom, co-operation and respect for everyone's needs.**

The benefits outlined below don't come *automatically* when a group switches to consensus! We usually have to work hard at making them a reality. But if these things are what you're aiming for, learning to use consensus is a great place to start.

Sharing power

Consensus enables us to take *collective* control over the decisions that affect us. At its heart is a respectful dialogue between equals, with people working together to meet everyone's needs. From the individual's perspective this means having as much control as possible over decisions that affect you, without having undue control over everyone else. Consensus means working *with* each other rather than *for* or *against* each other.

Building communities

Consensus decisions aim to meet everyone's most important needs and find a balance between what different people want. In an effective consensus group, everyone knows they can be honest about what they want, and trust they will be taken seriously. This in turn means getting to know each other, and building open and respectful relationships as foundations of genuine community.

Making better decisions

Consensus involves looking for 'win-win' solutions that are acceptable to all. It is neither compromise nor unanimity – it aims to go further by weaving together everyone's best ideas and key concerns – a process that often results in surprising and creative solutions, inspiring both the individual and the group as whole.

Getting things done

When everyone agrees with a decision they are much more likely to implement it. In the long run, people are also more likely to stay involved in a group that is committed to hearing their views and meeting their needs. This is particularly important in voluntary groups, where most people vote with their feet and leave if they don't feel valued and respected.

Protecting minority needs and opinions

In consensus, anyone can 'block' a proposal - and prevent it from going ahead - by not giving their consent. This option should never be used lightly, because it takes away the freedom of others to do what they want. However it provides a safety net for situations where a proposal would seriously hurt the group or people in it. Many groups very rarely *use* the block, but the fact that it is there means everyone knows from the outset that minority opinions cannot just be ignored, but solutions will have to be found to deal with all significant concerns.

Social justice

Consensus is about more than the relationships you build, and the decisions you make within your own group. It also offers a part of the toolkit for a radically different way of organising society.

What's wrong with the democracy we've got?

Compare the values of consensus to the ones that rule the world we live in. The western-style system of voting for representatives presents itself as the highest form of democracy. Yet in the very nations which shout loudest about the virtues of democracy, many people don't even bother to vote any more; whoever they vote for, decisions are made by an elite of powerful politicians and business people whose interests are completely different from the people they are supposed to represent. And not only do those politicians make laws for us without consulting us - they have the backing of the police, the prison system and the military to make sure we abide by their laws. Being allowed to vote 20 times in a lifetime for an MP or other political representatives is a poor substitute for having the power ourselves to make the decisions that affect every aspect of our lives.

In addition, most institutions and work places are entirely hierarchical – students and employees don't usually get a chance to vote their superiors into office or have any decision-making power in the places where they spend the greatest part of their lives. Or consider the supermarket chain muscling its way into a town against the will of local people.

On top of that our societies are full of social structures that mean that people with certain privileges often get a much easier ride in life (like being white and middle-class, to choose two examples among very many!)

Most areas of our society are ruled by power, status and money, not through democracy.

Another world is possible

The people in power would have us believe that this system is natural and inevitable. However, humanity is capable of organising itself in many different ways. Better alternatives to the current system are already here, growing in the gaps between the paving stones of state authority and corporate control. These seedlings of a fairer society give us a taste of just how different things could be. Homeless people occupying empty houses and turning them into collective homes, workers buying out the businesses they work for and running them on equitable terms, gardening groups growing vegetables collectively - once we start looking there are hundreds of examples of co-operative organising that we encounter in our daily lives.

Many of the people struggling for social justice have recognised that changing the way we make decisions is key to achieving equality and freedom. A just society is one that manages to balance the needs and desires of every individual with those of the closer community and the wider world. These are precisely the aims of consensus. When we use consensus in our groups we are practising the skills and attitudes we need to organise society in more equal ways. And more than that! Those groups could be the building blocks of something much bigger. Consensus has the potential to be used by much larger communities that want to organise co-operatively. (See the section on *Consensus in large groups*, pp50-61 for the methods that make this kind of large scale organising possible).

Who uses consensus?

Variations of consensus have been used around the world and through time. Here are some examples:

On the American continent non-hierarchical societies have existed for hundreds of years. Before 1600, five nations – the Cayuga, Mohawk, Oneida, Onondaga, and Seneca – formed the Haudenosaunee Confederation, which still works on a consensual basis today.

Utopian communes often use consensus decision-making, for example the Christian Herrnhüter settlement 1741-1760, the production commune Boimondeau in France 1941-1972 and Christiania, an autonomous city district in Copenhagen (self-governed since 1971).

In Britain many housing co-ops and social enterprises use consensus successfully, such as Unicorn Grocery, a wholefood grocery; and Radical Routes, a network of housing and workers' co-ops.

The business meetings of the Religious Society of Friends (Quakers) use a process similar to consensus to integrate the insights of each individual, arriving at the best possible approximation of the Truth.

Many activists such as anarchists and others working for peace, the environment and social justice regard consensus as essential to their work. They believe that the methods for achieving change need to match their goals and visions of a free, nonviolent, egalitarian society. Many mass actions and protest camps involving thousands of people have been organised and carried out using consensus, including the 1999 'Battle of Seattle' World Trade Organisation protest, the 2005 G8 summit protest in Scotland and the Camps for Climate Action in the UK, Germany and Australia. Consensus was used widely in the camps of the Occupy movement that swept around the globe in 2011-12.

Exciting software developments are bringing together online platforms and social justice activists. For example, the consensus based online decision-making tool *Loomio* (www.loomio.org) grew out of a collaboration between Occupy activists and social entrepreneurs from the *Enspiral Network (www.enspiral.com).*

Challenges of doing consensus in an unjust world

Most of us live in societies that are profoundly unequal, and these inequalities are often reflected inside our groups too - making it much harder to genuinely live by values of respect, equality, freedom and co-operation. We often bring the attitudes of wider society into the room with us and this can really limit the equality and freedom of individuals within our consensus groups. Making decisions that are truly consensual requires us to unlearn the beliefs we were taught by an exploitative society, and instead learn more respectful and co-operative behaviours.

In addition, our ability to come up with creative, win-win solutions is often severely limited by the options available. Adopting consensus doesn't remove constraints like unjust economics and laws. For example, a group of people could try to take more control over their lives by deciding to get a house together, and make decisions about how they live by consensus. Even if they managed to make their internal decisions as equals, an unjust society still limits what decisions they are *able* to make. For example, in many parts of the world, a lack of social housing, profits made by landlords and banks, and crackdowns on squatting can make it very hard to find anywhere to live at all.

Consensus is not a magic wand - it is one tool among many in the fight for a fairer world. And it takes a lot of practise. It is also about a lot more than just having better meetings - it is about building a culture that really puts principles like equality into practice. And the better we are able to work together, the better place we are in to challenge the structures that make it so hard in the first place.

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Why use consensus rather than committees or voting?

Other common options for decision making in voluntary groups and co-operatives are having an elected committee or holding a direct vote on each decision. These methods have their benefits, and each group needs to decide what is best for them. Here we explain what we see as the advantages of consensus over these options. We've also included 'informal hierarchy' – which describes a situation where groups are trying to use consensus, but some people have a lot more control than others.

Elected committees

Voluntary groups and co-operatives often elect a steering committee who make all the major decisions, to be carried out by a much bigger pool of people. For example, the committee might decide on a campaign and design materials, and then rely on other group members to put the word out through street stalls and door-knocking.

Some people argue it is necessary to pass power to a committee in order to make long term strategic decisions and ensure things get done effectively. Collective decision making in contrast can feel unwieldy and slow.

However, handing power to a small group of people, however well intentioned they may be, is no guarantee that they will act in our best interests or make the best choices. We all have different kinds of intelligence, capability and morality, and it is usually better to pool our strengths than rely on what one person can offer.

Effective group decision making is a skill that can be learnt. For example, many large co-ops successfully use consensus to manage their businesses and have developed innovative techniques to aid and speed up decision-making.

Direct voting

Here the members of a group do away with management committees and decide together on each issue by casting a direct vote. Each member has one vote, and can either say yes, no or abstain from a decision. Most groups will have some discussion and amend the proposal before voting to make it work better for more people. Those ideas that get a backing from a majority can go ahead, regardless of how strongly the minority feels.

A belief used to justify voting is that if a majority of people think something, they must be right. This is not always the case! People go along with a proposal for all kinds of reasons – personal interests, lack of confidence to go against the flow, lack of information or simply not having thought about an issue much. It may sometimes feel frustrating that in consensus just one or two people can bring up a concern and expect everyone else to deal with it. However, remember that at one time, only a small minority of people thought that climate change was something to worry about!

An argument for voting is that it is quick - because it takes less time to find a solution that only half the people in the room agree with. This can make sense when the decision isn't very important, or the situation is urgent and any decision is better than none. In consensus people might choose to go along with the majority view for these reasons. However, voting creates winners and losers, which can foster competition and distrust. In decisions with real impacts on the people involved it is usually worth looking for full support.

Often people argue that consensus works well in small groups but as groups get bigger and more diverse, it is simply impossible to find solutions that work for everybody. It is true that reaching consensus becomes a lot more difficult when there are more people and more perspectives. However, consensus can be used successfully by larger groups, see pg. 9 and the chapter on *Consensus in large groups* (pp50-61) for case studies and suggestions on making it work.

Informal hierarchy

By definition this is not a system a group chooses! This is a situation where some people end up with a lot more control over what happens than others, even though the group hasn't agreed to give it to them. This can happen even if people don't intend it - perhaps they are more confident to voice their views, or the group as a whole is more likely to act on their suggestions.

This is different from letting someone get on with implementing a task, or giving someone's word more weight because they have technical expertise. For example, there is no 'informal hierarchy' when the trained plumber is left to decide how to fit the pipes together. It is more of a problem if she dictates who has access to water!

See the section on *Dealing with power dynamics* (pp 41 - 42) for ideas on tackling informal hierarchy.

Conditions for consensus

It is much easier to use consensus in an ongoing way if the right conditions are in place: we've listed some key factors here. If your group is struggling, this checklist should help identify underlying issues you need to address in order to have a better experience of consensus. Alternatively, if your group is far away from meeting these conditions you may decide that consensus isn't right for you at this moment.

Common Goal

Everyone present at the meeting needs to share a common goal and be willing to work together towards it. This could be the desire to take action at a specific event, or a shared vision of a better world. Don't just assume everyone is pulling in the same direction – spend time together defining your aims and how you expect to achieve them. If differences arise in later meetings, revisiting the common goal can help to focus and unite the group.

Commitment to consensus

Consensus can require a lot of commitment and patience to make it work. Everyone must be willing to really give it a go. That means sticking with the process rather than jumping to a majority vote whenever you disagree. It also requires people to give time and energy to building equality in your group. Meeting everyone's core needs means recognising and addressing any barriers that lead to some people being heard less than others – whether that is about your group structure or interpersonal dynamics. Similarly, commitment to consensus means recognising and valuing all the many ways that people in the group are different from each other – both in what

solutions they want, and what they need from a meeting in order to be able to join in decision making.

Trust and openness

Consensus means being deeply honest with yourself, and the rest of the group, about what you really *need* to happen, and what is just a preference. Finding a solution usually relies on people being flexible about their preferences in order to meet all the cores needs. This requires a lot of trust. Sometimes we struggle to express our needs, other times it is hard to let go of our preferences! It is worth giving time to developing social relationships and addressing difficult dynamics in order to build trust – especially if you have big decisions to make together. Trust can also break down if decisions are made and not implemented - see page 49 for tips on ensuring accountability in your group.
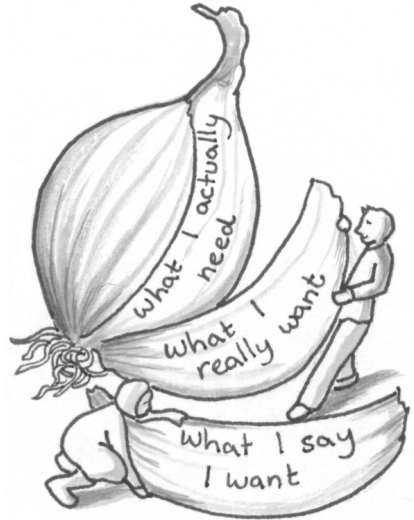
Sufficient time

For making decisions and for learning to work by consensus. Taking time to make a good decision now can save wasting time revisiting a bad one later.

Clear process

It's essential for everyone to have a shared understanding of the process that the meeting is using. There are lots of variations of the consensus process, so even if people are experienced in using consensus they may use it differently to you! There may also be group agreements or hand signals in use that need to be explained.

Active participation

If we want a decision we can all agree on then we all need to play an active role in the decision making. This means listening to what everyone has to say and pro-actively looking for solutions that include everyone, as well as voicing our own thoughts and feelings.

Good facilitation

When your group is larger than just a handful of people or you are trying to make difficult decisions, appoint facilitators to help your meeting run more smoothly. Good facilitation helps the group to work harmoniously, creatively and democratically. It also ensures that the tasks of the meeting get done, that decisions are made and implemented. If, in a small group, you don't give one person the role of facilitator, then everyone can be responsible for facilitation. If you do appoint facilitators, they need active support from everyone present.

Knowing *who* should be included

A consensus decision should involve everyone who will be fundamentally affected by the outcome - rather than the people who happen to attend the meeting where it is discussed! In groups where there are different people at each meeting it can be hard to know which of the new people will end up getting fully involved. And to complicate things further, many groups have members who are involved in carrying out decisions, but can't (or don't want to) come to meetings. Getting clarity about what kind of involvement people want, and being flexible about different ways to input into a decision can help individuals have their fair share of influence.

The consensus process

Each group uses a slightly different process to reach consensus - with different degrees of structure and formality. The key to making it work is for everyone to express their needs and viewpoints clearly, and for the group to use this information to find a solution which builds on the common ground and resolves differences.

The diagram below shows the 'journey' that groups usually go on in a good consensus process.

To begin with, the issue may seem simple, but the discussion soon **opens out** as people bring different perspectives, information and ideas to the table. The group then **explores** all the different options, wants and needs. This middle part of the discussion can feel quite messy – it can be hard to see the way forward when everyone is grappling with lots of ideas and different people's needs. You may think you are coming to agreement and then a new factor comes up and you have to go back to exploring differences (as represented by the spikes in the diagram). Don't lose heart! This exploration is necessary in order to get a good understanding of where everyone is coming from. This in turn enables the group to **come together** in finding a solution which genuinely has everyone's support.

Issue ? | Opening out | Exploring | Coming together | ✓ Decision
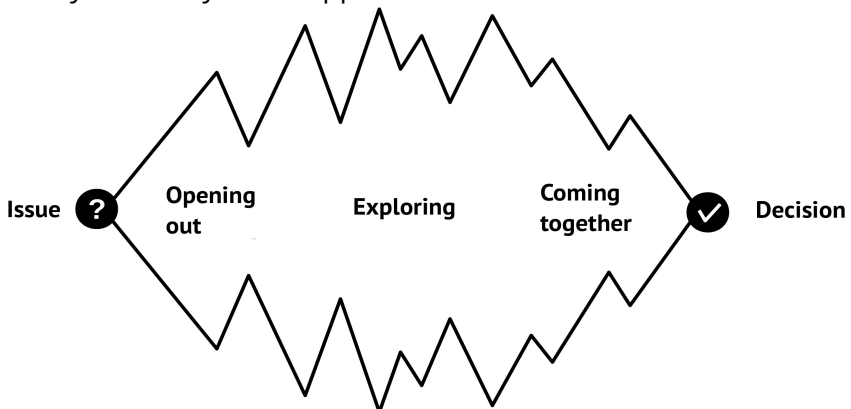
The stages of the consensus process

The stages below can help a group go through the process of opening out the discussion and coming back together in a decision as efficiently as possible. The process isn't always as linear as these models suggest – we may jump ahead and then go back and repeat some stages. But having these stages in mind can help you keep moving forward while staying focused on trying to meet everyone's needs.

Start by **introducing and clarifying the issue**. This ensures that everyone has the relevant background information and the group is clear about the remit of the discussion and key questions to resolve.

It can be tempting to launch straight into problem solving. However, a key stage in consensus is **opening out the discussion** to allow everyone to share their feelings, needs and opinions, *before* trying to find a solution. Recognising all the different things that are going on for people first is essential for finding a solution which suits everyone. Resist the temptation to make proposals at this stage. If ideas come up you could hear them briefly and then park them for the next stage.

Once you've got a good understanding of what is important to people, you can collect and **explore all the ideas** for moving forward. Looking at the pros and cons of different ideas helps the group with really understanding everyone's key needs and concerns.

The group then looks for common ground and weeds out some of the options, combining all the useful bits into a **proposal.**

Clarifying and **amending the proposal** helps to address any remaining concerns.

Test for agreement by clearly stating the final proposal and asking people to signal whether they agree or disagree. This stage is important to check if there are concerns that haven't been heard. If you don't have consensus go back to an appropriate earlier stage in the process.

Finally work out how to **implement** the decision. Making sure group decisions are acted on is essential for building trust in your meetings.

Consensus Flowchart

Stage 1: **Introduce and clarify the issue**
Share background information. Work out the remit of the discussion - i.e. what questions do you need to decide about now?

▼

Stage 2: **Open out the discussion**
Make space for everyone to share their needs and opinions before launching into trying to solve the problem. If ideas come up already, you could hear them briefly, then park them for the next stage.

▼

Stage 3: Explore ideas in a broad discussion
Come up with lots of different ways forward. Explore the pros and cons of different options. Identify key concerns, needs and objectives.

▼

Stage 4: **Form a proposal**
Look for a solution that meets everyone's most important needs. This might involve weaving together elements of different ideas.

▼

Stage 5: Amend the proposal
Look for changes that will make the proposal even stronger.

▼

Stage 6: Test for agreement
Clearly state the proposal and check whether there is real agreement. Starting by asking for who is against the proposal makes it easier for people to voice their concerns. E.g.:

      Any **blocks**?
      Any **stand-asides**?
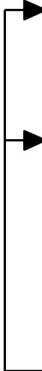   Any **reservations**?
      Do we have **consensus**?

If you have a block, or too many stand-asides you will need to go back a stage, and amend the proposal further, or create a new one.

▼

Stage 7: Work out how to implement the decision
Work out what needs to happen, by when, and who will do it!

Tips for participating in consensus meetings

Be willing to work towards the solution that's best for everyone, not just what's best for you. Be flexible and willing to give something up to reach an agreement. Sometimes the biggest obstacle to progress is an individual's attachment to one idea. If another proposal is good, don't complicate matters by opposing it just because it isn't your favourite idea! Ask yourself: "Does this idea work for the group, even if I don't like it the best?" or "Does it really matter which one we choose?"

Help to create a respectful and trusting atmosphere. Nobody should be afraid to express their ideas and opinions. Remember that we all have different values, backgrounds and behaviour and we get upset by different things.

Listen actively to what people are trying to say. Make an effort to understand someone's position and their underlying needs, concerns and emotions. If you don't understand try to say so. Give everyone space to finish and take time to consider their point of view.

Explain your own position as clearly as you can. Be open and honest about the reasons for your view points - rather than presenting the reasons you think are most likely to convince other people! Try to express your concerns early on in the process so that they can be taken into account in any proposals.

Don't be afraid of disagreement and conflict. Consensus isn't about us all thinking the same thing. Differences of opinion are natural and to be expected. Disagreements can help a group's decision, because with a wide range of information and opinions, there is a greater chance the group will find good solutions. Easily reached consensus may cover up the fact that some people don't feel safe or confident enough to express their disagreements.

Is consensus right for this decision?

Before getting into the decision-making it's worth asking yourselves whether consensus is the right process for this particular issue. For example in emergencies, appointing temporary leaders or an emergency group may be the wisest course of action.

Is the issue important enough to need the consensus of the whole group? For example does the whole group really need to decide together whether lunch should be half an hour or an hour, or would this decision be better of made by one person (who can canvass people's needs).

Who needs to be involved?

Consensus is based on the democratic principle that people who are fundamentally affected by an issue should be involved in making decisions about it. This means it can take some thought about who needs to input into a meeting. Sometimes this includes people who aren't part of the group. For example, a social centre might talk to the neighbours before setting the timing for a noisy DIY project. By contrast, often decisions can be made by a sub-group because they don't fundamentally affect everyone, e.g. the publicity group could be left to decide the colours of the posters.

Facilitation and minuting

Facilitation is about helping a group have an efficient and inclusive meeting. Facilitators take extra responsibility for helping a group through this process and reach decisions. They focus on ensuring that everyone has a fair chance to be heard and have their needs taken into account.

Minutes provide a written record of the meeting to help people understand and remember what was decided. They should be a clear, accurate summary of decisions and action points (who will do what by when).

Consensus stages in detail

This section looks at each of the stages in more detail. For each stage we've outlined it's purpose and made suggestions for how to make it work – use your judgement and pick the ideas that work for your group.

Stage 1: Introduce and clarify the issue

This first stage is crucial to get you off to a good start. Taking time to explain the issue and sharing all relevant background information lays the foundation for a focussed discussion and helps people to actively participate rather than leaving it to the 'experts'.

You might also want to explicitly agree the remit of the discussion – which particular questions are you trying to answer? What do you need to achieve by the end of this meeting? Which bits will be discussed another time?

Consensus will be easier to reach if you frame the questions in a way that allows for a range of answers. For example, asking 'Shall we let the police onto the protest camp?' leads people to answer simply 'yes' or 'no'. In contrast, asking 'The police want to come in, what shall we do?' leaves open a wide range of possible courses of action. The more options you are ready to consider, the more likely you will find one which addresses all the key concerns.

Sometimes a topic brings up such strong reactions that people need to air them before they can focus on discussing what to do. In this case, it is usually best to create space for expressing feelings here, at the very beginning of the decision-making process.

Suggestions for making it work

Explain the issue and why it needs to be discussed. This could be done by the facilitator, the person who brought up the issue or by someone with lots of knowledge about it. If possible prepare a summary of the relevant information and circulate it in advance so that people have a chance to read up and think about the issue.

Agree the remit of the discussion: What decisions need to be made by when? What are the key questions? Can you break complex issues into smaller chunks to tackle one by one? Who needs to be involved in making the decision? For example do you expect to make a fully detailed decision at this stage, or do you want to agree some principles and leave the fine details to be worked out by a smaller group?

Allow plenty of time for questions and clarifications. Don't assume that everything is crystal clear, just because it's obvious to you. Equally, if you are confused yourself, now is the time to ask for more information or explanations.

Stage 2: Open out the discussion

Good consensus decisions take into account the feelings, needs, concerns of everyone in the group. This stage is about making time to hear and share these and to get out people's different perspectives and ideas.

It might be tempting to jump straight into making proposals for solving the issue and it can be helpful to hear people's ideas straight away. However, it's also important to make space for everyone to share their feelings and opinions before launching into problem-solving. Getting a good understanding of where everyone is coming from and what is important to them will help you later on with finding solutions that everyone can agree to.

Suggestions for making it work

Allow each other time to process the information and to work out wants and needs, hopes and concerns. Some people might have done this in advance, others will need more time. You could use facilitation techniques such as paired chats or people thinking by themselves and jotting thoughts down on post-it notes to be shared in the whole group.

Find ways of gathering *everyone's* initial reactions and thoughts, rather than just those of a verbal few. For example you could have a go-round where everyone gets a turn to speak or set up an online survey tool.

Be as honest as you can about your own feelings. This can be difficult – if you're struggling to express things you could ask for extra space to get your words out. Equally, listen carefully to what everyone is saying and if you don't quite understand someone's position, ask for clarification.

Resist the temptation to jump straight in with a proposal. Instead make some mental space to hear what other people think.

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Stage 3: Explore ideas in a broad discussion

Once you've got a good understanding of what is important to people, you can move on to collecting all the ideas for moving forward. It helps to then engage everyone in a broad ranging discussion where you can explore the pros and cons of different suggestions and how they might fit together. Think about how you can address different people's hopes and concerns. When bringing up ideas take into account the views you've heard, and any objectives you've already agreed.

If you are to come to a solution that works for everyone you'll really need to get your head around different needs and ideas. Be creative in your thinking, consensus thrives on mixing up lots of different ideas.

Suggestions for making it work

Collect a *range* of ideas for solving the problem. It is common for a group to get stuck debating one or two early ideas - by coming up with other possibilities you can help each other think more flexibly. Where possible these suggestions should bear in mind the concerns you've already heard, but be clear that at this stage they are only ideas. This can help you avoid a situation where people are overly attached to the first idea they like, or disproportionately threatened by ideas they don't like. To generate ideas you could use techniques such as ideastorms or breaking into small groups.

Draw on all the experience, knowledge and wisdom present in your group. Make sure that everyone is heard. In particular, try to encourage everyone to voice disagreements and reservations, which can be hard to do when a majority (or a very vocal few) are being enthusiastic.

Stage 4: Form a proposal

After discussing the issue freely move on to finding agreement on what needs to be done.

This stage is also called synthesis, which means coming up with a proposal by combining elements from several different ideas or perspectives.

A good proposal will take into account and address the different hopes, concerns and needs that have been raised. In developing your proposal it might help to remind yourselves of the important issues that people have raised and the range of options that you have explored. Which options or combinations of options might best address the issues raised? See also the section on *Synthesis* (pg. 40) for a detailed explanation.

Suggestions for making it work

A summary of where you think the group and its different members are at can help everyone focus on finding a solution acceptable to all. Outline the emerging common ground as well as the unresolved differences: "It seems like we've almost reached agreement on that element, but we need to explore this part further to address everyone's concerns." It's important to not only pick up on clear differences, but also on more subtle agreement or disagreement.

It can really help to **use a flipchart** or **a whiteboard** to write up the areas of agreement and issues to be resolved. This means everyone can see what's happening and it focusses the discussion.

Build a proposal from whatever agreement there is. Look for ideas on how the differences can be resolved. Focus on solutions that address the fundamental needs and key concerns that people within the group have. Often people are willing to give way on some things but not on others which affect them more closely. The solution will often be found by combining elements from different ideas.

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Stage 5: Amend the proposal

Ensure that everyone understands the proposal and check whether people have any concerns. Look for amendments that address these concerns. If it becomes obvious at this stage that some people have strong reservations, see whether you can come up with a different, better option.

Suggestions for making it work

Ideally, write the proposal somewhere that everyone can see so you all have a shared idea of what you are discussing. Otherwise ask the minute-taker to read out what they've written so everyone can at least hear it.

Use techniques such as go-rounds and straw polls to gauge support for the proposal and to look for amendments.

Remember, consensus is about finding solutions that work for everyone. Be careful not to get carried away because most people like the proposal. Watch out for people who are quiet or looking unhappy and check with them.

Give people time to get their head around the proposal and what it means for them. If it's a complex or emotional issue then build in some time for reflection or a break before moving on to testing for agreement.

Stage 6: Test for agreement

Often groups get to a point in the discussion when it's easy to assume that agreement has been reached. The facilitator might say something like "OK, looks like we all agree, let's move on to the next agenda point." In this example it is very easy for a confident minority to assume that silence implies consent, and end up pushing their ideas over everyone else.

A clear stage of testing for agreement helps to avoid that. By clearly stating the proposal and asking people to signal whether they agree or disagree, we get a much more accurate picture of whether consensus has been reached.

Proposals rarely get wholehearted support from everyone, there is usually a spectrum from agreeing to disagreeing. Consensus groups provide different options to show levels of agreement/disagreement. Commonly used options are: the block, stand aside and reservations. We go into more detail in the chapter *Options for agreement and disagreement* (pp34-37), here's a quick summary:

Blocks stop a proposal from going ahead and you'll need to look for a new proposal. **Stand asides** and **reservations** provide a way to express concerns, but allow the group to proceed with the decision.

Exactly how much agreement you need to 'have consensus' depends on the situation. If a few people stand aside or declare reservations, then the group could go ahead anyway, or decide to work on a new proposal. When unity is very important for this decision, then even one stand aside will be unacceptable, for example when deciding on a policy that you need to trust everyone will implement. On the other hand a trial run of something might need less enthusiastic support from everyone.

Suggestions for making it work

Clearly state the final proposal and check that everyone fully understands what is being proposed. Does everyone understand the same thing? If it was written down and then amended you may need to re-write it for clarity!

Make sure that everyone understands the different options for agreeing / disagreeing used in your group. Often people are confused and block when they would actually be happy to stand aside. Sometimes people are scared of blocking even though they are deeply unhappy and use a milder form of disagreement instead. Ask people what their problems with the proposal are, and whether they have suggestions for how they could be addressed.

Check whether anyone has reservations, objections or needs to block. Ideally concerns should have already come out, but testing for them here (*before* asking who supports the proposal) creates a final safety net for anyone who hasn't been heard.

Check for active agreement. If there are no blocks, check for active agreement from everyone. This can be done verbally, or by people waving their hands. Watch out for silence or inaction and check for the reasons – it may be that someone has reservations that they didn't feel able to voice.

Summarise the result and be explicit whether a decision has been reached. This will help with being clear whether a decision was reached or not and could be done by the facilitator.

"OK, we have no blocks, 2 people standing aside, 1 in agreement with reservations and active agreement from 12 people. The proposal has passed."

Stage 7: Work out how to implement the decision

A group quickly loses energy for decision-making if things are decided and not implemented. Taking some time to work out the practical details and action points makes it much more likely that the decision will actually become reality.

See also the section *Accountability* (p49) for ideas on how to support each other in making sure that tasks gets done.

Suggestions for making it work

Agree enough detail so you are sure the decision will happen! Who needs to do what by when? How can the whole group check this has happened?

Share out the tasks among the group and record these action points in the minutes for the meeting.

Example of a consensus discussion

Stage 1: Introduce and clarify the issue

Facilitator	"The bit of wasteland that we've used as a park for the last ten years is going to be sold by the council."
	[*More information is shared.*]
	"So I guess the decision we need to make right now is whether we want to do anything about it, and if so, what."

Stage 2: Open out the discussion

Facilitator	"Let's go round and see what everyone thinks."
Bevan	"I guess it's time to find somewhere else for the kids to play."
Rashid	"I can't believe it. I've been so much happier since I've lived next to a park."
Ana	"But I don't think we should give up that easily! There's lots of things we could do..."

Stage 3: Explore ideas in a broad discussion

Facilitator	"Let's collect different ideas of what we could do, and then decide if we want to go ahead with any of them."
Mickey	"Let's raise money and try to buy the park."
Sandra	"What about squatting?"
Ana	"Mmm... not sure squatting is for me! I'd be happy to look at how to raise the money, though."
	[*more ideas are talked about*]

Stage 4: Form a proposal

Facilitator "So what are we going to do? Some of you feel that we should build treehouses in the park to stop the developers, and others think we should try and raise money to buy the land."

Rashid "But nobody's said that they're actually against squatting the park – just not everyone wants to do that. And squatting might slow the council down so we have time to raise the money. Let's do both!"

[*Lots of nodding; some people speak in agreement*]

Stage 5: Amend the proposal

Facilitator "That idea had lots of support, let's go round to see how everyone feels about it as a proposal."

Mickey "I like the idea of both squatting and trying to raise the cash to save the park, but people have been talking about separate groups doing those. I feel that we really need to stay as one group – I think if we split they might try to play one group off against the other."

[Everyone else has their say]

Facilitator "OK, so there's a suggestion that we amend the proposal to make it clear that we stay as one group, even though we're both squatting and raising funds at the same time."

Stage 6: Test for Agreement

Facilitator   "Right, we have a proposal that we squat the park, and at the same time we start doing grant applications to raise the money to buy the land to save the park for everyone. We're want to be clear that we are one group doing both of these things. Does anyone disagree with this proposal? Remember, the block stops the rest of the group from going ahead, so use it if you really couldn't stay in the group if we followed this plan. Stand aside if you don't want to take part in the plans. If you think we should consider any reservations you have then please let us know, even if you're still going to go along with it."

Sandra   "Yes, I've got reservations about the fundraising idea - I don't think it's realistic and I'm worried it's a waste of time. I won't stop you though, and I'm happy to help a bit."

Facilitator   "Does anyone else disagree? No? OK, I think we've got consensus. Let's just check – hands up if you agree with the proposal... Great, we have consensus, with one reservation."

Stage 7: Work out how to implement the decision

Facilitator   "OK, so we've taken on two really big jobs! Shall we split into two groups for now, and start ideastorming what needs doing for each, then we can bring it all back together at the end of the meeting?"

Options for agreement and disagreement

There are many different reasons why someone might not agree with a proposal. For example you might have fundamental issues with it and want to stop it from going ahead, or you might not have time to implement the decision or the idea just doesn't excite you.
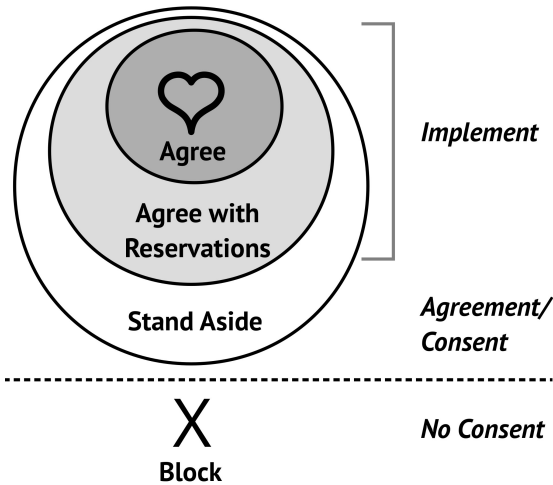
Consensus decision-making recognises this – it's not trying to achieve unanimity but looks for a solution that everyone involved is OK with. Not all types of disagreement stop a group from reaching consensus. Think about it as a spectrum from completely agreeing to completely objecting to a proposal.

The words used to describe the different types of agreement and disagreement vary from group to group. It's important to be clear in your group what options you are using and what they mean.

Here are some common options:

Agreement

"I support the proposal and am willing to implement it."

Reservations

"I still have some problems with the proposal, but I'll go along with it."

You are willing to let the proposal pass but want to register your concerns. You may even put energy into implementing the idea once your dissent has been acknowledged. If there are significant reservations the group may amend or reword the proposal.

Standing aside

"I can't support this proposal because... but I don't want to stop the group, so I'll let the decision happen without me and I won't be part of implementing it."

You might stand aside because you disagree with with the proposal: "I'm unhappy enough with this decision not to put any effort into making it a reality."

Or you might stand aside for pragmatic reasons, e.g. you like the decision but are unable to support it because of time restraints or personal energy levels. "I'm OK with the decision, but I'm not going to be around next week to make it happen."

The group may be happy to accept the stand aside and go ahead. Or the group might decide to work on a new proposal, especially where there are several stand asides.

Blocking

"I have a fundamental disagreement with the core of the proposal that has not been resolved. We need to look for a new proposal."

A block stops a proposal from being agreed. It expresses a fundamental objection. It means that you cannot live with the proposal. This isn't an "I don't really like it" or "I liked the other idea better." It means "I fundamentally object to this proposal!" Some groups say that a block should only be used if your objection is so strong that you'd leave it the proposal went ahead. The group can either look for amendments to overcome the objection or return to the discussion stage to look for a new proposal.

Block variations

The block is a defining part of the consensus process, it means no decision can be taken without the consent of everyone in the group. Ideally it should be a safety net that never needs to be used - the fact that the option is there means the group is required to take everyone's needs into account when forming a proposal. Because it is such a powerful tool, some groups have developed additional 'rules' about how and when it is to be used.

Requiring people who block to help find solutions

A variety of groups require anyone blocking to engage in a specific process to find a resolution, such as attending extra workshops or additional meetings. This provides a clear process for finding a way forward. The time commitment required for this also 'raises the bar', with the assumption that people will only block if they feel really strongly and are committed to finding a solution. Be aware though that 'raising the bar' like this will make it disproportionately hard for some people to block, for example if their time and energy are limited by health problems or caring responsibilities.

Limiting the grounds on which someone can block

Some groups introduce a rule that the block is only to be used if a proposal goes against the core aims and principles of the group, or if a proposal may harm the organisation rather than because it goes against an individual's interests or ethics.

For example, a member of a peace group could legitimately block others from taking funding from a weapon's manufacturer. On the other hand, if they had a strong objection to receiving money from the tobacco industry this would be seen as a purely individual concern, and they wouldn't be allowed to stand in the group's way.

Some people object that placing limitations on the reasons for blocking goes against the principle that every decision should have the consent of everyone involved. Also, in practice, it can be hard to find agreement on whether a proposal is or isn't against the aims of the group. On the other hand, particularly in groups where 'natural' commitment to the collective is low (for example because the membership is constantly changing, or the group is a very small part of people's lives) then placing a limit on the reasons for blocking can prevent abuse of power.

Fall-back options

Especially in larger organisations it is common to have a last resort voting option, in case blocks cannot be resolved. This tends to only kick in after a lot of effort has been made to find a solution, e.g. the issue has been discussed at several meetings without resolution. It often only applies to important decisions and usually requires a super majority (such more than 75% or 90%) for the proposal to pass.

Case study: N Street Cohousing, California

"Community members first seek consensus-with-unanimity. However, if one or more people block the proposal, the blocking persons organize a series of solution-oriented meetings with one or two proposal advocates to create a new proposal that addresses the same issues as the original proposal. The new proposal goes to the next meeting, where it probably will pass. If a new proposal is not created, the original proposal comes to the next meeting for a 75 percent super-majority vote, and it will probably pass. In 25 years at N Street Cohousing this process has happened only twice, with two solution-oriented meetings each." Excerpt from *Busting the Myth that Consensus-with-unanimity is good for communities,* 2012, www.ic.org/busting-the-myth-that-consensus-with-unanimity-is-good-for-communities/

Core skills for consensus

Listening, questioning, summarising and synthesis

Careful listening, summarising and synthesis help us reach a good knowledge and understanding of what everyone needs, and find solutions everyone can accept. Put simply:

- **good listening** enables us to hear what others are saying;
- **questioning** helps clarify what people are saying, or supports people to explore their needs and come up with new possibilities;
- **summaries** help remind us of the key points in the discussion and check we have the same understanding;
- **synthesis** is the skill that allows us to draw together different views and ideas to form one proposal that works for everyone.

Listening

Listening is a skill that is often under-estimated and under-valued. However, it is an essential part of effective communication, and requires an active effort to do well. When we really **listen** we try to suspend our own interpretations and opinions about what someone is saying. Instead we focus on trying to understand another person's position and their underlying needs.

Often in a meeting setting, listening is about focusing on all the different opinions and needs being put forward. A major objective is making sure that points don't get lost, especially when they are put

forward by someone who lacks confidence, or who is representing a minority viewpoint.

Questioning

In a situation where a group is having difficulty in hearing a particular perspective, you might choose to give one or two people focused attention to help them express it. You could support them with **clarifying questions** e.g. "What I think you're saying is... Am I right?" or "When you say that we 'aren't pulling our weight", can you say more about what you'd like us to do?"

Be wary of interrogating someone, or asking them to prove themselves - the aim is to support them to put their message across, not to pull it to pieces! To give the person as much control as possible over what they want to put across, ask **open questions** which don't have yes/no answers. For example. "How are you feeling about that?" or "Can you explain more about why you are worried?" etc.

Summarising

Offering a summary of the discussion can help reassure speakers they are being heard, and help to focus meetings. Usually this will involve pulling out key points of a discussion to help people think about ways forward. Occasionally, summarising an individual contribution can help - for example, if someone spoke a long time, and you want to check you all had an accurate understanding of what they were trying to say.

It helps to offer the summary tentatively and create space for people to correct you if you get it wrong. Use phrases such as: "What I've heard people saying so far is... Did I miss anything out?", "Am I right that your main concerns are...?" A summary carries more weight than an average contribution to a discussion, because it should represent the views of more people than just yourself. Therefore it is very important to give people the chance to correct any biases towards your own perspective! Not to mention helping you out with things you forgot.

Some people find it helpful to take notes as the discussion happens. This makes a succinct and accurate summary much easier.

Synthesis

Bringing together different ideas and trying to find a proposal that is agreeable to everyone is at the core of consensus. We call this process *synthesis*: finding connections between seemingly competing ideas and weaving them together to form proposals.

It is common for people to enter a discussion with strong views on concrete options they do and don't like. This is particularly the case when the discussion starts with only one option on the table, and the group can get polarised between who wants it and who doesn't. Finding a way forward often involves taking a step *backwards* and exploring the reasons why people are into different options. Once you've identified what people are trying to achieve, it is often possible to find new possibilities, where all the needs are met.

Case study: community shop opening hours

A volunteer-run community shop was trying to decide whether to open an extra day at the weekend. Digging deeper into the different concerns revealed that everyone agreed that it would help the shop to thrive if they were open at times when most full time workers were able to go shopping. However, some members were not at all keen to lose their own weekends. Identifying these core issues enabled them to look for new solutions: opening one weekday evening, and doing a big publicity push for new volunteers who were free to

Dealing with power dynamics

At the beginning of this guide we said that 'consensus is based on a respectful dialogue between equals'. However, even with the best intentions in the world, consensus groups often replicate the inequalities of wider society. None of us enter a meeting with a clean slate - we bring all kinds of different life experiences and expectations into the room, that impact on how likely we are to come away with our needs met.

These differences don't mean that the people who have more power are 'bad'. However, to effectively use consensus we need to tackle these power dynamics.

Addressing deeply ingrained inequalities is an ongoing process which can be painful and frustrating, but the rewards are better decisions and more genuine liberation and connection to each other. However, a group should try hard to ensure that the people who are already most dis-empowered by society don't end up doing most of the work in tackling a group's power dynamics.

Tips for dealing with power dynamics

This is a complex topic that brings up strong feelings and differing views. Below are some tips that we have found helpful. See pg. 71 for ideas about tackling power imbalances in a meeting.

Look for support from others in the group. If you think you have too much power, chat to other people in the same situation and see if you can support each other let go of some of that power. If you feel dis-empowered, sharing experiences and exploring strategies with other

people who feel the same may help.

Raise the issues with the people involved. This could be by asking someone for a one to one chat, bringing something up in a meeting, or responding when something happens. If you are feeling vulnerable, hurt and angry you have the right to say so, regardless of whether other people respond defensively, or don't like the way you say it.

Listen carefully when someone challenges you, even if you can't see what they mean straight away, or you think they've not understood your intentions. Hearing specific details might help you get your head round what they're saying - but be careful not to interrogate them! If they'd prefer not to explain further, you could read about the issues on the internet, or talk through non-confidential details with someone else.

You might well feel upset, angry or sad. You have the right to look for support with that - but usually it's not fair to expect that from the person who challenged you! If you are keen to explain your perspective to them, it might be best to do it after a period of reflection, and perhaps after getting a second opinion on whether the things you want to say are helpful, or just defensive.

Self-care: Changing your behaviours and attitudes is usually easier when you are relaxed and rested. On a deeper level, set aside time for whatever methods help you move past issues you are stuck on. This could be anything from talking it through with a friend, meditation, reading books, social media groups or counselling services. (The NHS, www.counsellingforsocialchange.org.uk or trainee therapists may be able to offer affordable support.)

Addressing conflict

Consensus is most successful when a group is able to explore differences - in needs, opinions, ethics, communication styles and working practices. Finding a way forward that works for everyone relies on really understanding where everyone is coming from. We often need to go through conflict in order to reach that understanding. Even if it seems to 'stir up' difficult feelings, getting things out in the open can make them much easier to deal with in the long run.

It is common for groups to be anxious about conflict. This may be personal, cultural or stem from specific anxieties about damaging relationships or 'wasting time'. These fears can lead some groups to brush differences under the carpet and try to 'just get on with things'. Other groups are the opposite - they wrangle over every issue and find it hard to ever reach agreement. The *Common Challenges* section (p67-69) offers tips for what to do in a meeting when you can't agree - here we focus on the group skills that help consensus work.
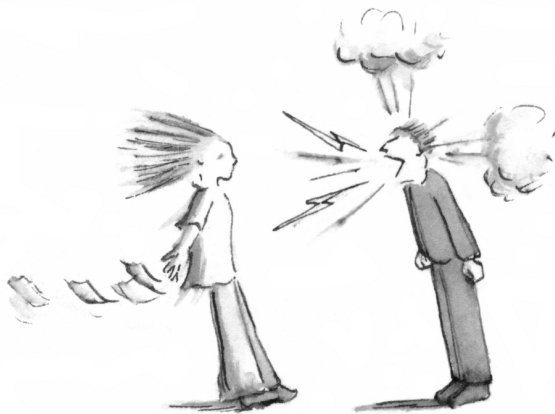
Approaches to conflict

A complicating factor is that we all have different 'default settings' when it comes to how we respond to conflict. For example, some people will have deeply ingrained habits that lead them to always accommodate to others' wishes. For someone else, the default will be to always fight their own corner. These differences make it harder to enter conflict as 'equals'. The person who accommodates may find they never get their needs met; the person who fights their corner may get demonised by the rest of the group as 'argumentative' or 'aggressive'.

Reaching consensus is easiest when we can all take a collaborative approach where we express our own needs and views clearly, and listen respectfully to other people's. (Of course, there are good reasons for using other approaches in some situations, e.g. we might have no option but to fight our corner by any means possible when someone has a lot of power over us.)

Being able to express yourself in a way that other people can hear is a skill. Some people learn it in childhood, many people work hard to develop it later in life. If you have gained this skill, then you could focus on making sure everyone else gets a fair hearing too. We all deserve for our needs to be met, regardless of how able we are to put our views across.

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Tips for communication in conflict

What works for you will depend on lots of factors, but this approach works well in lots of situations:

1. Be specific about *what* you have a problem with.

This might be a behaviour you find difficult, or an opinion you disagree with. When we feel strongly, it is common to make big, sweeping statements about other people, e.g. "You're being totally irresponsible." Most people find it easier to accept and understand a more factual statement, e.g. "You don't seem keen to discuss things that might go wrong."

> **Rather than saying:**
>
> "Some people don't even have the courage to say what they think."
>
> **Try saying:**
>
> "Angus said he doesn't mind what we do."
>
> *The second example avoids guesswork and exaggeration. It is also more direct, whereas 'some people' leaves everyone guessing who you are talking about.*

2. Be specific about *why*.

The aim is to be as clear as you can about your needs, feelings and views - without exaggerating or downplaying them. Talk as concretely as you can about the impacts you are worried about. This can help other people empathise and understand. If your reasons involve feelings, interpretations and opinions, try to use the first person (I, me, my etc.) to make that clear. For example, "The whole thing is going to be a disaster" is so general that it is easy to either ignore or contest. By contrast, it's harder to argue with: "I'm anxious about the kids injuring themselves if we just send them off into the woods with saws and axes."

Rather than saying:

"Everyone needs to participate."

Try saying:

"I want to hear what everyone's opinion is, because this decision will have a big impact on us all."

The second example states your needs and preferences, but doesn't claim they are objective fact!

3. Work out *where to go from there*.

It can help to say what you want, but requests usually go down better than commands! And again, being concrete and specific can help prevent misunderstandings. Compare: "We need to do a comprehensive health and safety review" (which sounds impressive but is quite vague), with "I want to think through how we make sure the kids use the tools safely."

The way forward will involve other people's perspectives as well! Careful listening can be hard when you are in the midst of a conflict. Anyone who is able to take a few steps back could help the situation with pro-active facilitation - aimed at clarifying and helping people express themselves, but not smoothing over differences. Listen out for people talking at cross-purposes, and try to draw out individuals who aren't being heard.

Rather than saying:

"We can't have someone sat there leaving the responsibility to the rest of us."

Try saying:

"Angus, I'll feel much more confident we're making the right choice if you can say what you think, does that work for you?"

The second example makes it clear what you want, but it also acknowledges that Angus has a choice in the matter too!

Effective groups

Sharing power is not just about who talks when you are making a decision! Consensus decision making becomes much easier when you take steps as a whole group to share power effectively long term. Here we've listed some systems and habits that can make it easier for more people to be involved in the group, and for the people involved to trust each other. Many of these tips also help a group work more efficiently.

Splitting the work load

Rather than everyone being involved in every decision, you could try assigning clearly defined jobs to individual people, for example doing publicity. Alternatively you could set up '**working groups**', where several people work together on a set of tasks, e.g. publicity group. The benefits of working groups over individual roles is that people can gain expertise in a particular area, without too much responsibility (or power) resting with just one person.

For this system to work well it helps if the whole group decides guidelines or broad agreements, which are then implemented in detail by an individual or a working group. For example, the whole group could decide on key publicity messages to put out, but only the publicity group is involved in writing social media posts.

It also relies on good communication between working groups/roles and everyone else, e.g. report-backs at meetings, email updates and so forth. On the other hand, it is inefficient and often bad for morale if the wider group tries to control every aspect of what the working group is doing. See below for tips on being accountable to each other.

Accountability

Trust and morale quickly break down in a group where decisions are made and not implemented. On the other hand, 'checking up on people' can leave them demoralised. Here are some tips for being accountable to each other:

Check you all have the same understanding of decisions taken. Concrete examples usually make for clearer communication, e.g. if you decide the food for your events should be 'ethical', you could each give examples of food you think fits this criteria.

Make clear agreements when someone takes on a task. For example, if a couple of people take on a funding application, decide together when it should be written by and what activities the group wants to apply for.

Find ways to check that things have been done, for example through report-backs at meetings, email updates or online tools for ticking of tasks.

Get used to giving feedback. Boost morale by noticing when someone does something well, or is putting a lot of work in on group tasks. Equally, try to be open when you are disappointed or frustrated by what someone has done. Talking about issues when they first arise can prevent bad feelings building up, and limit misunderstanding.

Consensus in large groups

Whether you are a national campaigning network, a large workers' co-operative, a long-term community or a mass protest, making decisions by consensus in a large group brings its own challenges and rewards. The conditions for good consensus still apply but may be harder to achieve in a bigger, more diverse group. Each stage of the consensus process may take longer and require some specialised facilitation tools. But when it's working, consensus with hundreds or even thousands of people can be exhilarating and inspiring! Below you'll find some tips and tools for consensus in larger groups.

Who needs to be involved in which decision?

When working in large groups and organisations it becomes even more important to think carefully about which decisions need to be taken by whom. In any organisation decisions are usually easiest and best made by the people directly affected by them. Make sure that you are not dealing with questions in a large group that can and should be dealt with by a sub-group.

Could the whole group decide on guidelines or broad agreements and a smaller group work out the details? For example, could the whole co-op agree the ethical purchasing guidelines and the buying team make the actual decisions on which products fit in with the guidelines?

Decisions made by everyone together need to be given enough time for true consensus to be achieved. Fewer decisions made well together are better for true flat decision-making than lots of decisions rushed through too quickly.

Ingredients for successful large group consensus

Many of these ingredients are also necessary in small groups. However, in a large group they need special attention, for a number of reasons. Everything takes longer with more perspectives and bodies in the room and so there is more need for clarity and efficiency to speed things up. The larger the group, the greater the need to create more 'formal' practices that reach everyone; for example, information should be available in writing to bring new members up to speed, instead of relying on someone chatting to them when they arrive. Similarly, larger groups cannot rely on close personal relationships being the 'glue' that holds everyone together, and so may need to be more explicit, e.g. about their common purpose and guiding principles.

Shared vision and common goals

If you are clear why and to what extent you are working together it's much easier to reach consensus. If you don't share enough common goals you may instead consider working in several groups and co-operating on those points you do agree on.

A big question for large groups is who should define the aims and vision. In many situations, a smaller founding group of people decide in advance what the overarching aims of the group will be and then invite people to participate on that basis. Alternatively, a large group of people may work together to develop a shared vision. This takes a lot of time and the larger the group, the more challenging this process will be.

In a larger group it is particularly important to write down the aims and details about how the group works, e.g. how you make decisions and who is responsible for what. This can serve as a reminder for the existing group and can be used to bring new members up to speed. In meetings, make sure you're clear about what's already decided and what is still open to discussion.

Trust

Trust is more difficult to achieve in large groups as it's harder to get to know one another. Spend time discussing aims, people's politics and motivations. Build in a way for new people to get to know at least some of the people in the group quickly. Social time is important too. Make sure there are opportunities for lots of communication and updates between different sub-groups. This helps people trust that the things they aren't personally involved in are getting done well!

Clear process

Making the process clear will help people to participate fully in the decision-making as well as reassure people that they will get heard. The consensus process in large groups can get very confusing, as it tends to be a bit more complex and involve more facilitation techniques.

For example, write down the steps you will go through to make a decision. Remind people of this at the beginning of each meeting and provide print-outs of the consensus process and the agenda. You could also run regular consensus workshops for new people as well as refreshers for existing members.

Active participation

Large meetings can easily be dominated by a few, more confident people, with less assertive or less experienced people finding it difficult to participate. Good facilitation and techniques such as splitting into small groups (see below) can help everyone to take a full part in the meeting.

Providing information in advance

Providing detailed information for each agenda item in advance of a meeting can help reduce time needed for clarification in the meeting itself, especially if everyone knows how they can ask questions beforehand (for example, contact details are provided for the person who put the agenda item forward). It also allows people to digest the information before the meeting and work out how they feel about an

issue. This can help people feel more confident to ask questions/voice opinions.

Facilitation team

Setting up a facilitation team to plan and run the decision-making process is vital for a successful outcome. Unless you have a facilitator with supernatural powers, you will probably need several people in a team: someone to look after the discussion, someone to take hands, someone to write up notes on a flipchart, a timekeeper, a doorkeeper and someone to prepare refreshments.

Agenda

A well planned agenda with a mix of activities will help keep the meeting focussed and keep energy high. In a larger group, assume that everything will take more time, so you'll need to include fewer agenda items. Think about how you can give people the space for thoughtful exploration of issues and plenty of time in small-group / pairs.

Testing for consensus

Testing for consensus in large groups often requires a quite formal approach to ensure that everyone's position is taken into account. Rather than asking 'Are we agreed then?' (which generally results in silence), the facilitator could explicitly run through all the options for agreeing/disagreeing (e.g. block, stand-aside, reservations, full support etc.) and ask people to raise their hand or a colour coded card for the option of their choice.

Accessibility issues

Crowded spaces can be particularly difficult for people with specific physical impairments. For example someone who is hard of hearing will struggle in small group discussions where there is lots of background noise, a wheelchair is harder to navigate when there are lots of feet and chairs in the way. Not to mention issues like social anxiety! Choose a venue that is as accessible and spacious as you can,

and ask people in advance if they have any suggestions on how to make a meeting more accessible for them. For more information see our guide *Venues and Accessibility.*

Using consensus in coalitions and alliances

Coalitions and alliances formed between pre-existing groups, for example to fight a specific issue, can find it difficult to reach consensus. Often the groups involved have different aims and ways of working and some may not be committed to consensus. For example, if one of the groups is used to decision making methods where different factions are each trying to 'win' an argument, they may find it harder to be flexible with their opinion and work to find solutions that are acceptable to all.

Put time into getting clear on why you want to work together / what your shared aims are and remind yourselves of those reasons frequently! Reaching consensus is often easier when you can agree on several different activities to meet the agreed aims - rather than everyone trying to convince everyone else that their preferred way is the only option.

Consensus processes for large groups

The seven stages for reaching consensus are the same as for small groups, but the techniques you use for each stage may differ. Some stages may happen with everyone together, but where possible use small groups to enable in-depth discussion and participation. Below we give an introduction to some tools that can work well to facilitate consensus in large groups. Usually a combination of processes is needed for smooth and successful large group consensus.

Plenary meetings

A plenary meeting is a meeting attended by all members of a group. Plenaries can range from twenty to hundreds of people. They can work reasonably well for sharing information, to make proposals and for final decision making. They are a much less useful format for an in-

depth discussion of issues, as the large numbers limit how actively involved everyone can be.

As well as the question of who is comfortable to speak in front of a large group, there is also an issue of time constraints. Giving everyone just 3 minutes to speak in a meeting of 100 people would take 5 hours! There are also practical limitations – if the meeting is too large, people won't be able to hear/see each other or even fit into one room.

To increase participation in a plenary you could give preference to people who have not spoken before and ask more confident people to hold back. You could also build in a few minutes of chatting in pairs to help people process what's been said and make contributing easier for people who like to gather their thoughts before speaking in front of a group.

To help with clarity, you could summarise regularly where the discussion is at. You could also write up key facts, ideas/concerns and proposals for everyone to see - either using flip chart, or, in larger groups, laptops and projectors. Make sure everyone can hear each other, e.g. use a microphone if necessary.

Case study: Unicorn Grocery general meetings

Unicorn Grocery is a workers' co-operative running a wholefood store in Manchester, UK. They are a highly successful ethical business and now have over 70 worker members. Committed to collective flat management and using consensus decision-making, Unicorn operates in teams, where most day to day operational decisions are taken. Annually elected representatives of teams come together in fortnightly meetings, to support and monitor sub-group functions and implementation of decisions.

Decisions that affect the whole co-op, such as changes to pay and working conditions, policy amendments, agreeing team spending over certain amounts, and agreeing donations from their two

funding streams are made in members meetings. These are general meetings of all co-op members and take place 3-4 times a year, lasting 3-4 hours.

Proposals for the members meetings are usually generated by teams, and then taken to a members meeting. There are a number of pre-meeting steps to ensure that proposals already take into account a wide range of views before being taken to the full membership. This includes circulating issues for feedback and pre-meeting discussion sessions where people can ask questions and feed in additional concerns and ideas. If a proposal does not reach consensus in the members meeting, it can either be withdrawn or a workshop is arranged for those most in disagreement to resolve differences and suggest an amended proposal. At the time of writing (spring 2017) Unicorn have a rapidly growing membership, and are exploring new methods to maintain high levels of engagement.

www.unicorn-grocery.coop

Proposal-led consensus

Many larger groups use proposal-led consensus, where, instead of starting discussion all together with an open question, a proposal is developed by a sub-group. The whole membership discusses this proposal and then amends, accepts or rejects it. This often happens in a plenary but could also take place in smaller groups.

A standardised format can be very helpful in getting well developed, well-informed proposals. For example, using a specially developed template can ensure that the proposal contains background information, intended outcomes and clear wording.

Proposal-led consensus works better if the proposers seek as much input as possible from the wider membership in order to form the

proposal, e.g. using questionnaires, focus groups or online discussion forums. In a situation where the proposal is rejected, many groups use a fall-back, where a sub-group forms to look for a new proposal which they think will be acceptable to the whole group. This is then tested in the same way as above.

Discussion in small groups

There are many reasons why you may want to split a large meeting into smaller groups for part of a consensus process. Where appropriate, each small group could take a different topic or task. Even when parallel groups discuss the same topic, more people can actively explore an issue at once, which saves time in the long run, as well as increasing participation. Getting more people involved like this can increase the energy in the room, and make it possible to discuss emotionally charged issues that would be difficult in a large group. And finally, focused tasks like proposal-forming can be more effectively done by a small group.

Try this small group process

Begin with a whole group session where the issue is introduced and clarified. Then split into small groups to share and explore their ideas, concerns, wants and needs. These feed back to the whole group, which can then compile a list of potential solutions. There could be another round of small group discussions, where each group explores all the ideas, or each group could take away just one idea to examine in depth. The small groups then return to the main forum and report back, highlighting possible obstacles to each idea. If full group discussion cannot resolve the obstacles, small groups can go away again to try to find ways

Some people resist small group work. It requires trust to let

other people go away and discuss an issue, and that trust isn't always present. Some people worry that their concerns or ideas could get lost, others struggle to choose which group to be part of. To reassure people it's important to have a well-functioning feedback process. It is good to explain that feedback will happen, give groups guidelines on good feedback and set aside some time for the small group to agree what to feed back to the large group.

You also need to think about the sort of groups you need – a random allocation or groups of people with particular skills or experience or with energy for the topic?

The spokescouncil (or delegates' meeting)

The spokescouncil process takes the small groups model further by replacing the need for everyone to come together with a system of delegate meetings. It is an effective way of allowing all members of a large group to actively participate and provides a workable format for consensus decision-making with hundreds of participants. It is used by many groups such as social centres, workers' co-ops, peace and environmental movements (see box for an example).

In this process the whole group breaks up into smaller groups who then communicate with each other through 'spokes' (also called delegates or reps/representatives). Small groups could, for example, be based on work teams within a business, local groups within a national network or affinity groups within a mass action, or be a random split.

People in each small group discuss the issue(s) to come up with concerns and ideas. A small group may develop a preferred proposal or come up with a range of ideas.

Each group sends a delegate (or 'spoke') to the spokescouncil meeting, where all delegates present the breadth of ideas and concerns of their groups. The spokes then come up with proposals that they think might be acceptable to everyone and take these back to groups for more discussion and amendments. This process is repeated until agreement is reached. The power to make decisions remains with all members.

The remit of the spoke needs to be clearly defined for a spokescouncil to work effectively. The task of the spoke is primarily to feed back information between the small group and the council. The spoke needs to act as a voice for *everyone* within the small group, communicating the breadth of collective thought rather than their own personal point of view. Generally spokes do not make decisions for their group, but will always check back for agreement before a decision is finalised. However, some small groups might also empower their spoke to take decisions within agreed parameters.

Being the spoke is not easy – it carries a lot of responsibility. You might like to rotate the role of spoke from meeting to meeting, or agenda item to agenda item. It also helps to have two spokes, one of them presenting the viewpoints and proposals from their small group, the other to take notes of what other groups have to say. This helps to ensure that ideas don't get lost or misrepresented in the transmission between small groups and the spokescouncil. Spokescouncils require good facilitation by a team of at least three facilitators, who work well together and who are skilled at synthesising proposals.
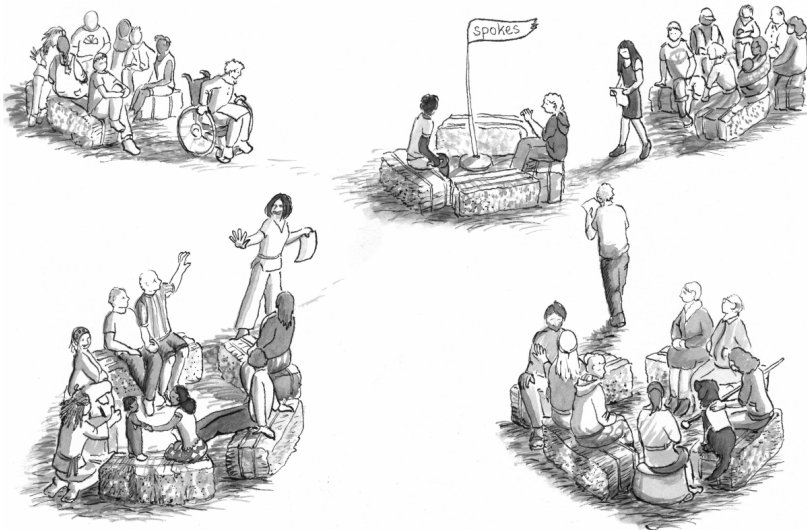
If all the people involved in making the decisions are together in the same place and the space is big enough, it works well to have groups sitting in a cluster behind their spoke during the spokescouncil. This way, groups can hear what is being discussed and give immediate feedback to their spoke. This can make the spokescouncil more accountable and reduce the need for repeating information.

Groups clustered behind spoke
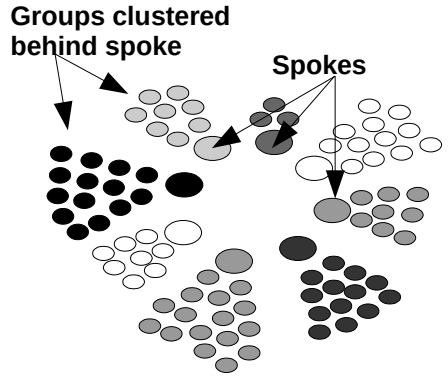
Spokes

Where participating groups are based in different places, the spokescouncil either involves travel for the spokes or communication via telephone conferences, chat rooms or online decision-making tools such as *loomio*.

For more detail see our flowchart for a sample spokescouncil process, available on our website.

Scaling it up

In some situations such as mass actions you might have more than 20-40 small groups. In this case you can add more tiers, where each spokescouncil sends a spoke to a second or even third level spokescouncil. This can work for many thousands people, e.g. 9000 people involved in the blockade of a Castor nuclear waste transport in 1997. With this number of people it becomes even more important to think carefully about which decisions need to be made by everyone and which can be left to individual groups. Often the tiered spokescouncil mostly acts as a channel for information and consultation rather than being used for actual decision making.

Case study: Radical Routes

Radical Routes is a UK wide mutual aid network of around 40 member co-ops. Decisions are made by consensus using a delegates' meeting structure. The network comes together in Business Meetings four times a year to make a variety of decisions, including dealing with proposals by member co-ops to the Radical Routes loan fund.

Each co-op sends a representative to the meeting. An agenda for each meeting is sent out beforehand so that member co-ops can discuss the agenda items, and tell their representative how to respond to proposals in the meeting. Representatives may have a remit of what's OK to agree to, and when they have to go back to their co-op for instruction.

If a new proposal comes up or a proposal is changed significantly over the course of a meeting, it always goes back to the member co-ops for further discussion and approval.

The running of the network is delegated into working groups, such as finance, secretarial and co-op support. Working groups get on with day to day tasks within remits set by the whole network and within agreed budgets. Working groups are accountable to the membership via the business meetings, where they report back on their work.

www.radicalroutes.org.uk

Common challenges

Putting consensus decision making into practice isn't always easy! It takes time to unlearn the patterns of behaviour we have been brought up to accept as the norm, such as competing to 'win' an argument. Probably the most important thing to do is to take time and reflect on how your consensus process is going, giving each other feedback and constantly looking for ways to improve.

If you are having long term problems, a great place to start is the Conditions for Consensus - do they exist in your group? If not, could you build up those conditions? For example, if people in the group are consistently at odds with each other, maybe you need to take a few steps back and collectively define what the aims of the group are. If this doesn't work and you can't agree on an overarching shared purpose, then perhaps consensus wouldn't be the right process for your group to use at this moment?

Below, we've listed some common challenges that crop up in meetings, and made suggestions for how you could respond. Hopefully they'll spark some ideas of your own as well. A key question to ask yourself is what underlying issues could be causing the problem. For example, someone who you think 'talks too much' could be lonely, excited, feeling unheard or unaware of how much space they are taking up! The most effective approach to the problem will depend on what the underlying issues are.

One approach is to say out loud in the meeting what you see happening. That way you can work together to shed light on *why* it might be happening, and what you could do about it. Alternatively, pick solutions based on what you guess to be the underlying issues. Either way, be prepared to try something else if it doesn't work how you hoped!

Our meetings take a long time

Reaching good consensus decisions can take longer than voting, especially when a group is new to it. It can take time to look at ideas until all objections are resolved, and some decisions might take more than one meeting to decide. The advantage of consensus is that decisions are usually of a higher standard. Consensus does get quicker with practise, particularly in a long-term group.

A few ways to speed things up

✔ Making sure in advance that you have all the information you need to reach a decision at the meeting. If vital facts are missing, work out what needs to be done to get them for the next meeting and move on;

✔ Delegating decisions about details to working groups (e.g. publicity or fundraising);

✔ Splitting the meeting into parallel small groups to deal with several issues at once – each small group comes back with a platter of proposals for the whole group to decide on;

✔ Delegating a small group to synthesise everyone's ideas into a few possible solutions to be discussed later by the whole group;

✔ Facilitation that keeps the group focussed and stop people from going off on tangents;

✔ Keeping accurate minutes to avoid having to revisit decisions.

How do we deal with urgent decisions?

Time pressure can make it much harder for a group to keep up a commitment to involving everyone and working hard for a solution that takes different concerns into account. This can happen a variety of ways. Urgent issues might come up when no meeting is scheduled, which could lead to the decision being made by those with most flexibility or most time online. In meetings, urgent issues can lead to rushed decisions because of stress and group pressure 'to just get on with it'. Or the opposite can happen! When meetings run for a long time thrashing out a decision that 'must be made today', many people will get tired, leaving only those with the most stamina to be involved in the final decision.
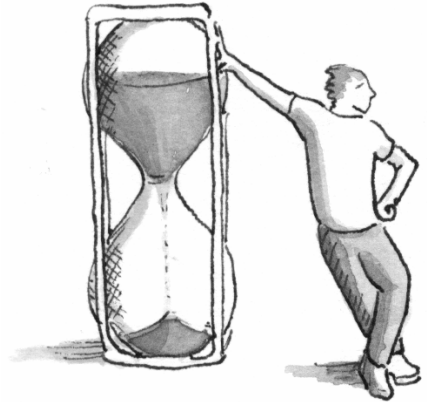
Some alternatives

Agree a process for decisions that come up between meetings, and be prepared to use a variety of communication methods (e.g. phone, email, social media) so that no-one gets left out of the loop. Where possible, re-visit decisions later, so the whole group isn't stuck with something that was decided by a few people in a rush.

In a meeting, prioritise the agenda to make sure you can tackle urgent issues adequately. Postpone less urgent decisions, or allow them less time. Can the meeting be extended or continued another time? Could you find a temporary solution? Could a small group go away to discuss (and resolve) the issue?

Our meetings aren't very focussed

Many informal groups hold meetings which are very unstructured - they jump from topic to topic, and mix up 'business talk' with friendly chat. For some people this makes it hard to concentrate, for others it is a more 'natural' and relaxed way of having a conversation. Limiting the focus to one topic at a time has benefits, and can be worth practising. For example, it can make it easier to explore an issue in depth, really hear everyone's perspectives and reach clear decisions.

A few ways forward

Draw up a realistic and fair agenda. An ideal agenda covers all the important and urgent issues, but is short enough that there is space for relationship-building and being relaxed. Prioritise what you want to discuss in what order, and then appoint a facilitator to help you stick to it. When new topics arise they can be noted down to be discussed later - unless there is a strong reason why they need to be decided before the items already on the agenda. It is crucial that everyone is able to input into the agenda, and has enough information to participate in discussions. If someone feels they had no control over what's on the agenda, it wouldn't be surprising if they spent a lot of time talking 'off topic'.

Socialise outside meetings. It can take the pressure off your meeting time if you spend time together socially, where you can get all the 'off-topic' chats off your chest. Try to make your social time as inclusive as possible. For example, the pub is a common default in Britain, but there are lots of people it doesn't work for! Be aware

also that giving up extra time to socialise can be hard for people with children or other commitments. Try to vary what you do to suit as many people as possible.

Have breaks, and keep your meetings short. People's ability to sit still and concentrate varies massively, and the person who feels that everyone else is unfocused may simply be the one with the most stamina! Food, drink, fresh air and 'energisers' can help people keep going, as can facilitation tools that vary the group size and get people moving around. Alcohol, on the other hand, usually reduces concentration and listening skills, and many groups decide not to mix it with meetings.

What if we can't agree?

It may be that tempers are riding high and you all recognise yourselves as being in a situation of conflict. Or maybe you are floundering around without coming to a satisfactory way forward. The conflict section (pg 29) deals with how you can develop more personal skills for conflict situations. Here are some suggestions for what the whole group can do when you get stuck.

Do the conditions for consensus exist in your group?

It may be that you simply are not in the best place to make a good decision together, for example because trust is low, or you just don't have enough information to make the decision. In this case try stepping back from the particular decision you are trying to make, and spend more time creating the conditions for consensus, or resolving the practical issues that are holding you back. This could be as simple as explaining consensus to everyone in the meeting, or sending someone off to do a bit more research and coming back to the decision later. At other times, it will involve more work – e.g. having one to one chats, a whole group facilitated meeting and some social time together to build trust and open communication before making big decisions together.

Have you had an honest discussion about where people are coming from?

Sometimes the group has not gone deep enough in their discussion. People may be holding back from being completely open about their concerns and motives, or they might find it difficult to express them. Alternatively, it may be that someone hasn't been listened to carefully enough.

Listening can be particularly hard at moments of conflict. It can help to appoint a facilitator to encourage everyone to explain their viewpoints in more depth, and to notice when people seem to be talking at cross-purposes. By finding out what is at the root of people's concerns, you can focus in on the key issues that need to be addressed.

Has the discussion become polarised?

Groups often get stuck when individuals or factions hold strong conflicting positions. Remind yourselves that consensus is about co-operating to find solutions and not competing. Holding onto our personal agendas and opinions is often an obstacle to this co-operation happening. Encourage self-reflection. If the language of a discussion starts taking on tones of 'either /or', take a break and try to encourage a more flexible mindset when you come back. For example, ask people to argue the point of view they like the least to help them understand the other side of the conflict. Or ideastorm new ideas to get past the ones you've been stuck on. Or identify all the things you have in common, and see if you can build a new proposal from there.

Do you need to agree now or can you choose one of the options below?

Break down the decision into smaller bits. Are there any points on which you agree and can move forward? Can other areas be decided later?

Put the decision on ice, and come back to it in an hour, a day or a week. When people have a chance to cool off things can look quite different. If the decision is postponed try to engage conflicting parties in conflict resolution in the meantime.

Imagine what will happen in a year, or five years if you don't agree. How important is the decision now? A long term view can make people more willing to shift their positions.

Agree an alternative process for taking a decision that all parties can sign up to. For example, the people most affected, or the people who

feel the strongest could hold a separate meeting to make the decision. Some groups also have majority voting as a backup, often requiring an overwhelming vote such as 80% or 90% to make a decision valid. Be careful not to turn to this at the first sign of trouble – it's a definite last resort in a consensus group.

Do you need an outside facilitator to help you through your sticky patch?

Bringing in outside help needs to happen when there's still enough good feeling left for people to co-operate with the process and be willing to accept a different facilitator. Quite often an outside facilitator will be seen as neutral, which can help things along.

Is it time to split the group?

If the group continually divides over the same issues, it may be time to consider whether you would be more effective operating as two separate groups. In a situation where a few members continually find themselves at odds with the rest of the group, it is worth checking whether they really agree with the core aims, and if not, whether if it would be better for them to leave. Although this might be painful for everyone concerned, it is usually better than trying to stay together and change each other. Ideally, you'll carry on supporting each other and working together on shared projects.

How do we get from lots of ideas to one proposal?

Sometimes an issue brings up a large number of ideas and it can be hard to know how to take it forward. The following structure may help: use a prioritisation tool to whittle down the list of ideas, and then discuss a favoured few in more detail, before developing a proposal that weaves together different bits of the original options.

Prioritisation

The aim is to reduce the number of ideas to a manageable number for discussion. The risk is that you discard some ideas too early - before the group as a whole has explored the issue enough to see how they are relevant. Some examples:

Dots: write up all the ideas, allow each person the same number of dots (1-6 usually works). They then distribute their dots between the ideas they think are most worth exploring (which could be 1 dot on each of 6 ideas, 6 on one, or somewhere in between). This is a tool where the majority 'wins', so you could allow someone who had very strong feelings about the importance of an idea to put it forward for discussion, even it didn't have majority backing. Make sure that 'rejected' ideas are not lost entirely - they may come back in when the group draws up a proposal.

Show of hands: Another way to gauge which ideas a group wants to explore further would be to read out the full list, and ask everyone to raise their hand for the ones they are interested in discussing.

Evaluating ideas

Explore the ideas that people have come up with in more detail. This usually isn't a process of choosing one of the ideas to take forward - the final decision may include elements of different suggestions, or be something altogether new! However, by evaluating concrete ideas you can find out more about key concerns and areas of disagreement. Many people find it hard to name their needs or notice what

assumptions they are making in an abstract discussion - but we are more likely to notice when someone puts forward an idea we don't like! Therefore, it is important to find out the reasons *why* people do or don't like an idea. A simple technique is explained below.

Pros and Cons: list the benefits and drawbacks of each idea and compare the results. A tool like this helps people offer criticism of each other's ideas in a way that isn't too personalised. It may also reveal that what one person sees as a downside, someone else thinks is a good thing. This is helpful information about what the group disagrees on, and may point you towards new useful discussion!

Drawing up a proposal

A good proposal is usually a new idea which takes into account the different concerns raised during the discussion. This may be one of the options you've already explored with a few adaptations, or a totally new suggestion
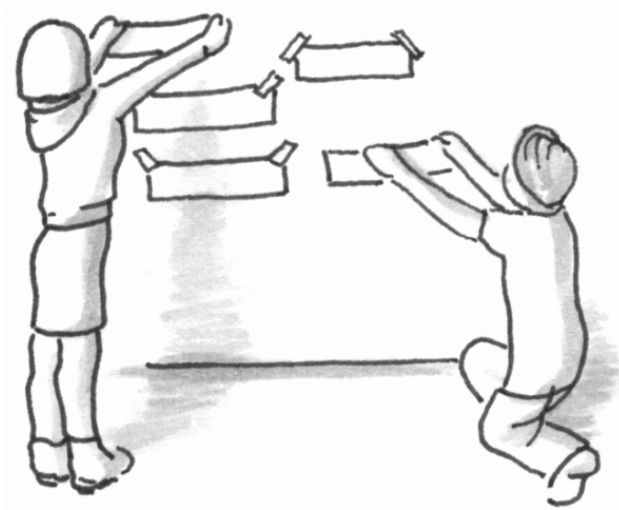
Some people have more power than others

Even when a group wants to organise non-hierarchically, there are almost always differences in how involved people are, how comfortable they can be, and how much they shape the decisions that happen.

For example, you may find that some people feel able to make decisions about the group outside of meetings, while others don't even feel confident to put forward agenda items. In meetings, some people's opinions may be heard and taken into account a lot, and others might not feel able to express their views at all. And it is much easier for some people to get to meetings because of differences in health, other responsibilities, energy, mobility etc. There can be a wide variety of reasons for all these differences, but the impact on your decision making is that it is less consensual - you cannot take everyone's needs into account unless you are able to hear them!

The section on *Addressing conflict* (pp 43-46) makes suggestions for how you can develop your own skills to tackle power dynamics. Here are some ideas you can implement in your group.

Ideas for tackling power dynamics in meetings

Facilitation tools can provide a short term, pragmatic way of equalising participation in a meeting. For example, opening a topic by discussion in pairs may help people formulate their thoughts so they can contribute more in the whole group.

Pay special attention at the '**testing for consensus**' stage. If a group practices consensus informally the views of confident people may be carried forward as decisions, simply because no-one opposes them. Take the time to check everyone's views, and once you have agreement, double-check that the minutes also reflect what everyone thinks they have agreed to!

Use your **listening skills** when you think that someone is getting misunderstood or not heard at all. If you are a confident communicator, this can be a powerful way to offer support to others. See the 'listening, summarising and synthesising' section (p27) for more

on this.

Ideas for tackling power dynamics in the long term

Increasing the accessibility of your meetings can help to equalise who finds it easy/possible to contribute. Does your meeting venue work for people with different impairments, e.g. mobility and hearing? Does your publicity reach a wide range of people? Do you take into account public transport, work patterns, care responsibilities, health needs etc. when deciding where, when and how long to meet for? There are no perfect answers, especially on a tight budget, but this should not prevent you from looking for improvements!

Sharing out the workload within the group can help to equalise the kind of power that comes from close involvement in what the group does. For example, you could arrange a rotation system for routine tasks, set up working groups that new people can join, and organise skill-sharing sessions to help people take on unfamiliar roles within the group.

What do we do when someone blocks?

In an ideal consensus process a block wouldn't occur, since any major concerns about a proposal would have been noticed and dealt with before moving on to the decision stage. The fact that someone feels the need to block a proposal means that something has gone wrong earlier in the process. However, this will sometimes happen, so the option to block needs to be available.

Ordinarily, if someone blocks, the group should go back to the discussion stage, and try to find an amendment or entirely new proposal that would be satisfactory to everyone.

To guide that discussion, try to find out why the block has happened. For example, do they think the proposal goes against the agreed aims and principles of the group? Are they concerned about the impacts on particular individuals? Or do they feel that the process leading up to the proposal was deeply flawed, perhaps because they or other people weren't heard in the discussion.

What if the block is being misused?

Because blocks are such powerful tools it's important to be aware of how they can be misused. The block may be misused by someone who simply doesn't understand consensus and hasn't thought about the impact on others. Or it may be that someone is consciously or subconsciously using the block to maintain or gain power or attention.

Explain the consensus process and how the block works. Do this at the beginning of meetings, and possibly again if a block occurs. Be clear about the difference between a block and a stand aside - though be careful that the person blocking doesn't feel under pressure to withdraw their objection.

If one person regularly blocks it may indicate that the group isn't meeting their needs. Perhaps they don't feel listened to, and the group needs to work harder to hear and understand their point of view. Or perhaps they don't really share the groups' agreed aims, in which case it could be better for them to leave.

www.seedsforchange.org.uk

If several group members regularly block then it is a sign for the whole group to look at how they are working together. Are there fundamental differences of opinion that mean it would be better to work as two separate groups? Or might it help to review the groups' rules around the block? (see *Block variations* pp 36-37 for more on this)

What if people are afraid to block?

Making use of the block can be hard, especially for people who don't feel confident in their group. It can involve standing up to perceived or actual group pressure and impatience. Many people are tempted to keep quiet and important discussions are sometimes avoided.

Create an atmosphere where people will feel able to block. This places particular responsibility on the facilitator to check what levels of agreement exist and to help people feel comfortable to speak up.

What if group doesn't accept a block?

Sometimes the rest of the group is unwilling to respect a block. This is a difficult situation. A group should respect a block, unless it stems from a fundamental disagreement with the aims of the group or is driven by abuse of power (although it isn't always easy to tell if this is the case.)

Some groups use 'I feel so strongly I'll leave if you go ahead' as the definition of the block. In theory this means the group always has the option to over-ride a block – knowing that the consequence will be that person leaving. Assuming the person was being honest about the extent of their disagreement, then this is a last resort option!

A couple of things to do in the short term

✔ Have a break for 10 minutes or even a few days – it allows people to cool down and have a think. Quite often the group will feel differently after a bit of time out.

✔ Spend more time exploring people's needs and concerns. Make sure that the member using the block is able to articulate themselves clearly, and the group can understand their concerns.

Fully formed proposals from individuals or sub-groups

Sometimes people bring fully developed ideas or proposals to a meeting. This could be from a sub-group or an individual who has already spent some time thinking about the issue. Often this can speed up the process and many people like the clarity it brings, but it can also make it harder to reach a fully consensual decision. This may be the case if the meeting doesn't allow time for others to consider the matter for themselves or skips the stage of integrating everyone's needs and concerns. Some people may end up feeling dis-empowered or pressured even if they don't have a problem with the proposal itself.

In some groups, particularly networks or coalitions that aren't able to meet often, bringing fully formed proposals is the agreed process to speed up the discussions. In this case, the discussion starts by assessing the pros and cons of the proposal, and often the most that can happen in a meeting is to agree, reject or amend the proposal put forward, but not to create a whole new one from scratch. This kind of process usually relies on the proposals being circulated in advance for comments and amendments, and may require a fall back system if consensus can't be reached - for example a further meeting to come up with new ideas between the people who feel the most strongly.

Possible options

✔ Put the proposal to one side until people have explored the issue from scratch, and come up with a range of other ideas. Then discuss it alongside the new ideas that have come up in the meeting. Form a new proposal that synthesises elements from all the different ideas.

✔ Explore the issue, and the pros and cons of the pre-formed proposal. Modify it until people are happy. This only works if there is only one pre-formed proposal.

Our group is biased towards the status quo

In some consensus groups there can be a high barrier to change - a proposal that suggests a new way of doing things can be blocked by just one resistant person. By contrast, there doesn't need to be a new decision to keep things the same, even if some people are deeply unhappy with the current arrangement.

There is a tricky balance to be struck here. If a group is clear about its aims and principles, it could be unfair for someone to try to change them fundamentally. After all, if one or two individuals disagree with core aims, it is a sign they may be in the wrong group. On the other hand, members who want things to stay the same may interpret a suggested change as much more fundamental than it really is. Or they simply have worked hard trying out different options in the past, and feel reluctant to enter an experimental stage again. However, an ongoing willingness to engage with new ideas enables a group to respond to changing circumstances.

An effective group should accommodate both the wish for change and the wish to protect that which is well-proved and working. If this is not achieved then ultimately people will get frustrated and leave the group.

Some ideas to try:

✔ A sub group could go ahead without everyone being involved.

✔ A trial period for a new way of doing this, with built in review.

✔ Identify what it is that people are afraid of and find solutions.

✔ Address the 'special status' that makes existing decisions harder to change. For example, policies could automatically be reviewed every few years.

✔ If you have a new idea, you could start by explaining the problems you see with the current set-up. Then ask everyone to engage together in looking for new solutions that address your concerns. You might not end up with the idea that you first thought of - but neither are you stuck with doing it the old way.

# Further Reading

Publications from Seeds for Change

A Consensus Handbook: Co-operative Decision-Making for Activists, Co-ops and Communities, Seeds for Change, 2013, ISBN: 978-0957587106

Effective groups - starting them up and keeping them going, 2018, www.seedsforchange.org.uk/effectivegroups

Facilitating Meetings, 2020, www.seedsforchange.org.uk/facilitationmeeting

Facilitation Tools for Meetings and Workshops, 2020, www.seedsforchange.org.uk/tools

Organising successful meetings, 2019, www.seedsforchange.org.uk/meeting
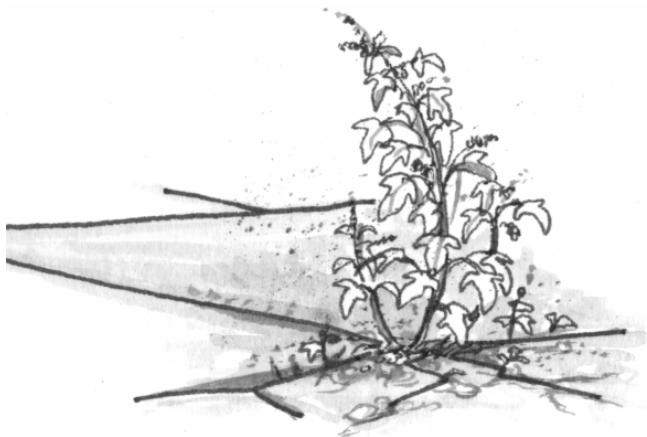
Publications from other authors

Come Hell or High Water: A Handbook on Collective Process Gone Awry, Delfina Vannucci and Richard Singer, 2009. ISBN 1849350183

Consensus: A New Handbook for Grassroots Social, Political, and Environmental Groups, Peter Gelderloos, 2006. ISBN: 1884365-396

Democracy in Small Groups – Participation, Decision-Making and Communication, John Castill, New Society Publishers, 1993. ISBN: 0865712743

Facilitator's Guide to Participatory Decision-Making, Sam Kaner with Lenny Lind, Catherine Toldi, Sarah Fisk and Duane Berger, New Society Publishers, 1996, ISBN: 0865713472

From Conflict to Cooperation – How to Mediate A Dispute, Dr Beverly Potter, Ronin Publishing, 1996. ISBN: 0914171798

The Mediator's Handbook, Jennifer E. Beer with Eileen Stief, New Society Publishers, 3rd edition, 1997. ISBN: 0865713596

Resource Manual for a Living Revolution, Virginia Coover, Ellen Deacon, Charles Esser, Christopher Moore, New Society Publishers, 1981, ISBN: 0865710082

The Tyranny of Structurelessness, Jo Freeman aka Joreen www.jofreeman.com/joreen/tyranny.htm, original version Vol. 2, No. 1 of The Second Wave, 1972

Working with Conflict, Fisher et al, Zed Books, 2000. ISBN: 1856498379

Consensus decision making

Consensus is a way of reaching agreement in a group that is creative and co-operative. Instead of voting on a decision and having a majority of the group get their way, consensus means working together to find solutions that everyone actively supports. All decisions are made with the consent of everyone who is fundamentally affected, meaning that everyone's core needs are taken into account.

This guide covers the values and principles of consensus, a common process for reaching consensus decisions, and offers tips and suggestions for making it work in practice. Also includes sections on core skills, using consensus in large groups and ideas for tackling common challenges.

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