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CONSENSUS

Tap into a powerful decision-making tool

By Joan Richardson

The meeting ended and the participants headed home, most of them believing they had reached consensus on the issue.

One team member hadn't said a word during the meeting. But, in the parking lot afterwards, he unloaded on another team member about his objections to the agreed-upon plan.

"But I thought we had consensus on that," said the confused listener.

"Did you hear me say I agreed with it?" asked the disgruntled member.

"Well, no, not in so many words. But you never said you *didn't* agree with it. Why didn't you speak up during the meeting?"

Oops. Isn't this how groups too often reach consensus? Or at least reach what they think is consensus?

Consensus is often held up as the ideal way to make decisions. At its best, decisions reached by consensus will have more power and influence because of the support from the decision makers. At its worst, however, consensus can mean groups nodding in unison but not backing up their decisions with conviction.



Consensus is a cooperative effort to find a sound solution acceptable to everyone.

"Consensus is a cooperative effort to find a sound solution acceptable to everyone, rather than a competitive struggle in which an unacceptable solution is forced on others," says Thomas Kayser in his book, *Building Team Power*.

But consultants who work with groups on decision making agree consensus is not appropriate for every situation nor every decision.

"It's not in our best interest to even try and use consensus for every decision," said Ann Delehant, a New York consultant who works on team process issues.

Kayser agrees. "It should never be considered the only way or the best way to make decisions," he writes.

Kayser says consensus works best with major elements of a decision such as defining the problem, identifying assumptions about the situation, establishing criteria for evaluating solutions, choosing the final solution, and setting priorities.

Delehant inserts another component. "When ownership and commitment to a decision are fundamental to a successful implementation, that's when I recommend consensus," Delehant said.

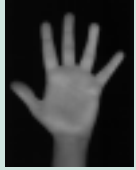
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Tools For Schools

COVER STORY

WHERE ARE YOU
ON THIS PROPOSAL?

The facilitator asks individuals to react to the proposal by raising the number of fingers that correspond to their position.



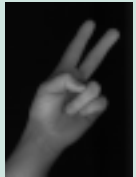
5 I'm all for the idea. I can be a leader.



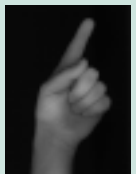
4 I'm for the idea. I can provide support.



3 I'm not sure but I am willing to trust the group's opinion.



2 I'm not sure. I need more discussion.



1 I can't support it at this time. I need more information.



0 No. I need an alternative I can support.

Source: *Keys to Successful Meetings* by Stephanie Hirsh, Ann Delehant, and Sherry Sparks. Oxford, Ohio: NSDC, 1994.

Tap into a powerful
decision-making tool

Continued from Page One

In her work with teams, Delehant leads groups through a process that helps them identify the problems they will solve, who will be involved in solving those problems, and how they will make their decisions.

For example, in some cases, a team may designate a subgroup to decide some issues because of the expertise of those group members. That subgroup would then inform the larger group about its decision.

A team also can agree by consensus that one individual can decide relatively trivial matters or act when decisions must be made quickly, she said.

STEPS TO CONSENSUS

In *Team Building Toolkit*, Deborah Harrington-Mackin recommends the following steps to reach a decision. The group:

1. Discusses the topic, raises questions and concerns, and presents data and options for solutions.
2. Decides whether consensus is appropriate for this decision, how much time will be needed, and what to do if consensus is not achieved.
3. Explores differences and similarities, agreements and disagreements.
4. Makes suggestions or modifications on the proposed solutions.
5. Generates a new solution based on the discussion.

At this point, Delehant said facilitators need to poll each person in the group, pointedly asking, "Do you agree with and will you support this decision?"

Facilitators cannot wait for members to volunteer their opinions. Going person-by-person around the table ensures that every person voices his or her position and prevents opponents from hiding behind silence.

Responding that "I can live with it" is not satisfactory, she said. "Saying 'I can live with it' is the lowest form of consensus. If everybody around the table says out

loud that they can support it, then you have true consensus. I want people to walk out of the room ready to support the decision," she said.

Consensus has been reached when all members can comfortably say they support the solution or decision.

WHEN THERE'S NO CONSENSUS

If polling reveals a lack of consensus, the group should turn to its alternative position. Consider these suggestions from NSDC's *School Improvement Planning Manual*.

1. Create a compromise position and ask everyone to react to that.
2. Provide private "think time" and begin discussion again.
3. Leave the issue and return to it later.
4. Organize small groups to reach consensus and then begin large group discussion again.
5. Create a contradictory statement to refocus the discussion and identify real concerns.
6. Choose another facilitator.

At the opposite end of the spectrum from "no consensus" are groups who agree too much, a phenomenon Kayser labels "group think."

"Group think occurs when the group strives so hard for agreement that virtually all critical thinking is eliminated," he writes.

To achieve true consensus, teams must explore and resolve their concerns before they reach a decision acceptable to all.

Exploring the conflict over issues is a sign of a healthy group, she said.

"I love conflict when I'm working. For me, the ideal group would start out wrestling and disagreeing. Because they trust each other, they're willing to share all their thoughts with each other and trust that they can work things out," she said.

True consensus emerges from this spirit of trust and openness, said Delehant. □

Defining consensus

COMMENTS TO THE FACILITATOR: This process enables group members to clarify their understanding of a vague concept. It also encourages group members to work together before they deal with a decision they must make. In addition, the activity helps strengthen the relationships within the group before they make consensus decisions.

TIME: 45 minutes.

SUPPLIES: Paper for individual use, butcher paper for display, pencils, markers.

PERSON RESPONSIBLE: Leader/facilitator

Directions

1. Have each person write his or her own definition of consensus.
2. Divide the group into pairs and have individuals in each pair compare their definitions. Then, ask them to re-write their definitions to incorporate aspects of both versions. Ask them to write their definition on a large sheet of paper.
3. Group each pair with another pair. Ask the foursome to combine the two definitions into one definition. Again, have them write their new definition on a large sheet of paper. Repeat this process with a foursome joining another foursome; then groups of eight joining another group of eight, etc., until the entire group reaches a single definition of consensus.
4. Display the final agreed-upon definition of consensus.

Discussion questions

How did the definition change as more people became involved?

How did you feel about participating in this process?

How does the process of reaching consensus compare with other decision-making processes?

Consensus has been reached when these criteria have been met:

- * *I believe that you understand my point of view.*
- * *I believe that I understand your point of view.*
- * *Whether or not I prefer this idea or concept, I will support it because it was reached openly and fairly.*
- * *I can live with this decision.*

– *William Ouchi, Theory Z*

Deciding how to decide

COMMENTS TO FACILITATOR: This activity will help your group become aware of various decision-making methods and will help participants select the methods best suited for the decisions they will make as a team. It is helpful for the group to reach consensus on the appropriate decision-making methods they will use. However, if consensus is difficult at this stage in your team's development, a simple majority vote can be used. You can repeat this activity as your team matures.

TIME: Two hours.

PREPARATION: Create transparencies from the next two pages. Plan to have an overhead projector available for your meeting. You may also want to prepare paper handouts for the group.

PERSON RESPONSIBLE: Leader/facilitator

Directions

1. Place the Decision Thermometer transparency on the projector. Expose each decision-making method as you discuss it, beginning with consensus.
2. Begin the discussion by displaying the group's own definition of consensus. (*See activity on Page 3.*) Having their own definition will streamline the process and eliminate confusion.
3. Examine the various decision-making methods. Discuss the pros and cons of each. (Another option would be to have the group identify the various decision-making methods on its own.)
4. After the group has discussed each item on the Decision Thermometer, place the Decision-Making Analysis transparency on the overhead.
5. Lead the group through a discussion of each decision-making process. Fill in each square on the transparency and, if you have created handouts, encourage participants to do the same on their sheets.

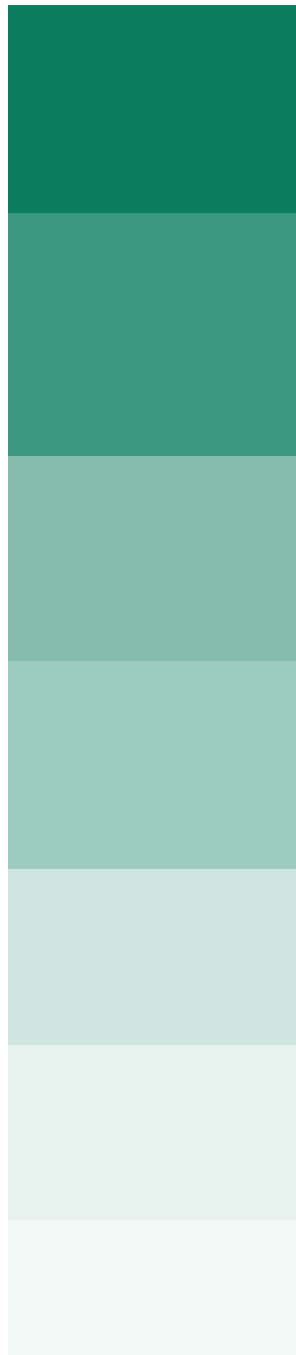
Discussion questions

What are the pros and cons of each decision-making process?

Which decision-making process is most appropriate for the decisions you will make as a school team?

Which decision-making process will lead to the best decisions for your team?

Decision-making thermometer



LEVEL OF AGREEMENT	DECISION-MAKING METHOD
100%	Consensus
<p>Legitimate needs and interests of all parties are explored. All interests are fairly presented and considered. A creative, unified team solution emerges which all members agree to actively endorse and support.</p>	
80%	Super Majority
<p>Decision made by a large percentage of the group but the solution does not satisfy all members. All members' interests are considered and heard. Fair treatment is given to all legitimate solutions, but the small minority of those who disagree does not delay the action of the large majority.</p>	
51%	Majority Vote
<p>Decision made by a simple majority vote. Minimal discussion and consideration of minority viewpoints occurs. Members with minority viewpoint agree to the outcome selected by the majority.</p>	
40%	Compromise
<p>The total group or subgroups agree to trade-offs on key aspects so each group gets something it wants while giving up less important items. The whole group does not vote on the issue.</p>	
20%	Minority Decision
<p>Decision is made by a powerful individual, expert, or subgroup. The opinions or input of other members are not always sought or not always considered carefully.</p>	
1%	Authority
<p>Decision is made by a single person with position of authority in the organization without overt regard to others' opinions or external information.</p>	
0%	No Decision
<p>All members avoid making a decision. Spoken or unspoken agreement exists not to discuss the issue.</p>	

Decision-making analysis

Examine the various decision-making approaches in relationship to the following criteria. Use this information to determine which method best fits the decision needed in each situation.

	AUTHORITY	MINORITY DECISION	COMPROMISE	MAJORITY VOTE	SUPER MAJORITY	CONSENSUS
Time needed to reach the decision						
Number of people who can be involved						
Level of commitment generated by the decision-making process						
Skill required by participants in the decision-making process						

RESOURCES

Learning more about CONSENSUS

❑ **Building Team Power: How to Unleash the Collaborative Genius of Work Teams** by Thomas A. Kayser. Burr Ridge, Ill.: Irwin Professional Publishing Co., 1994. Identifies four complete, highly-detailed steps to improve the work of teams in your schools. Based on examples drawn from business. ISBN 0-7863-0302-6. Price: \$25. Phone (800) 634-3966.

❑ **Consensus Building** by Joellen Killion and Cindy Harrison. Audio recording of a workshop offers dozens of practical suggestions for when to use consensus instead of other decision-making processes. Six cassette tapes plus workbook. ASCD Stock #61293150 T85. Price: \$89, ASCD members; \$107, non-members. Phone (800) 933-2723.

❑ **"How Management Teams Can Have a Good Fight"** by Kathleen Eisenhardt, Jean Kahwajy, and L.J. Bourgeois III, *Harvard Business Review*, July-August 1997. Based on a recent study of management teams in high-tech companies. Shows how the better decisions were made by work teams that could argue effectively. Check your local public library for a copy.

❑ **How to Make Meetings Work** by Michael Doyle and David Straus. New York: Jove Books, 1982. Describes the interaction meeting method, a tested way to stop wasting time and get things done at meetings. NSDC Stock # B17. Price: \$6, non-members; \$4.80, members. Phone (513) 523-6029.

❑ **Keys to Successful Meetings** by Stephanie Hirsh, Ann Delehant, and Sherry Sparks. Oxford, Ohio: NSDC, 1994. A manual that provides the knowl-

edge, skills, and processes necessary to conduct meetings. Includes more than 70 guide sheets for immediate reproduction and use in meetings. NSDC stock # B39. Price: \$80, non-members; \$64, members. Phone (513) 523-6029.

❑ **School Improvement Planning Manual** by Stephanie Hirsh and Mike Murphy. Oxford, Ohio: NSDC, 1992. Comprehensive step-by-step guide to develop and implement school improvement planning. NSDC stock # B8. Price: \$80, non-members; \$64, members. Phone (513) 523-6029.

❑ **Skilled Facilitator** by Roger Schwarz. San Francisco, Calif.: Jossey-Bass, 1994. Practical guide for leading groups effectively, including many suggestions regarding decision making. ISBN 1-55542-638-7. Price: \$30.95. Phone (415) 433-1740.

❑ **Team Building Toolkit** by Deborah Harrington-Mackin. New York: American Management Assn., 1994. Spells out guidelines for turning a diverse group of employees into an effective team. Offers helpful lists of tips and tactics for team leaders. ISBN 0-8144-7826-3. Price: \$17.95. Phone (212) 586-8100.

❑ **Theory Z** by William Ouchi. Reading, Mass.: Addison-Wesley, 1981. To understand the role that consensus building plays in Japanese management. Check your local bookstore or library for a copy.

If you have a resource that has been particularly helpful to you as you work with your school team on building consensus, please contact Tools editor Joan Richardson. See staff box for contact information.

NSDC STAFF

Business Office/Member Services

Shirley Havens, Business Manager
P.O. Box 240
Oxford, Ohio 45056
(513) 523-6029 Fax: (513) 523-0638
E-mail: NSDCHavens@aol.com

Executive Director

Dennis Sparks
1124 W. Liberty St.
Ann Arbor, Mich. 48103
(313) 998-0574 Fax: (313) 998-0628
E-mail: SparksNSDC@aol.com

Associate Executive Director

Stephanie Hirsh
16306 Sunset Valley
Dallas, Texas 75248
(972) 818-1450 Fax: (972) 818-1451
E-mail: NSDCHirsh@aol.com

Director of Publications

Joan Richardson
1128 Nottingham Rd.
Grosse Pointe Park, Mich. 48230
(313) 824-5061 Fax: (313) 824-5062
E-mail: NSDCJoan@aol.com

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TOOLS FOR SCHOOLS STAFF

Editor: Joan Richardson
Designer: Susan M. Chevalier

Ask Dr. Developer



Dr. Developer has all the answers to questions that staff developers ask. (At least he thinks he does!)

Honoring all voices crucial in consensus

Q *I'm all for getting everybody on the school improvement team to agree with a decision. But, what do you do when you've got a couple of stubborn people who just won't go along with the group?*

A This is the \$64,000 question of the Reaching Consensus Challenge. Individuals who block consensus are likely to feel as if they haven't been heard by the group. They probably aren't objecting to the whole solution, just to part of it. Your mission is to ensure that their concerns are heard and that the group responds to them.

Here's a series of questions the facilitator can ask to help move the group toward consensus.

- Under what conditions would you support this solution?
- What part of the solution do you oppose?
- What parts of the solution would you modify so you'd be more comfortable with the solution?
- What would be necessary for you to

agree with this solution?

- Would you be willing to live with the solution for a limited time?
- What would be a reasonable time before we reassess the decision?
- Under what conditions would you be willing to put aside your differences?

In addition, ask the team members who support the recommendation:

- What are you willing to do to adjust your views to respond to the discomfort of those who are not yet in agreement?
- If you were not in agreement, what parts of the solution might be troublesome to you?

One caution: Individuals who feel as if they haven't been heard can become uncomfortable by being singled out for this kind of attention. The facilitator needs to be sensitive to that issue as well.

These can be frustrating moments. Try to keep in perspective that whole school systems may struggle with similar issues. As you discover how to deal with this challenge, you'll be learning a great deal that can be applied to other, even larger, debates in your district and state.

Send your questions to Dr. Developer, 1128 Nottingham Rd., Grosse Pointe Park, Mich. 48230

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NATIONAL STAFF DEVELOPMENT COUNCIL

Business Office
PO Box 240
Oxford, Ohio 45056
Membership info: (800) 727-7288

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