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CONSENSUS

Arrive at agreement — agreeably

BY JOAN RICHARDSON

Each time a school or district forms a team, study group, or working group to explore an issue, there is usually an underlying assumption that these groups will operate on consensus. Team members will not take formal votes but reach an understanding about what should be done and how it should be done.

But how does a group of individuals — especially a group that is not accustomed to working together — arrive at consensus?

Washington educator and consultant Connie Hoffman believes groups must first agree on a definition of consensus. Although many would define consensus as unanimity on a topic, Hoffman disagrees. With her colleague Judy Ness, Hoffman defines consensus this way:

Consensus is a decision that has been reached when *most* members of the team agree on a clear option and the *few* who oppose it think they have had an opportunity to influence that choice. All teams members agree to support the decision.

To make this definition work, a team decides in advance what “most” means for the group. In a

large group, that’s typically 75% to 80%; in a small working group of five or six teachers, it might mean that four or five must agree.

But getting to consensus does not just happen. Groups need to take deliberate steps in order to get to a point where they will have consensus.

Here is a process that Hoffman and Ness created and have used with dozens of groups and teams in their work in Washington.

Preparation Phase

Groups should spend some time in the beginning establishing how they will work together and exactly what work they will do.

1. State the situation.

One of a principal’s key responsibilities with any team is ensuring that the group understands what it is expected to do. Hoffman suggests that the principal verbally explain her expectations to the group and then work with the group to put those expectations into a written charge statement.

Questions that the group answers in this docu-

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Arrive at agreement — agreeably

Continued from Page 1
 ment include: *What is the team's goal? Is this group making a decision, advising on a decision that will be made by another group, or collecting information that will be used by another decision-making body? What products is the group expected to produce? How often will the group meet? Who will set the agenda? What are the operating norms for the group? What budgetary constraints must the team work within? What is the deadline for this work?*

Hoffman said discussing the group's understanding and expectation for its work helps reduce the possibility of confusion. "We assume everybody's working on the same problem but often we're not," Hoffman said.

Write the situation on a flip chart so everyone can view it. Each team member reviews the situation and signs the chart paper to indicate that he or she believes the statement is accurate. If some participants are confused, the team continues to discuss the situation until everyone is clear.

2. Identify the group's operating norms.

Understanding the behavioral expectations for the group is as important as understanding the group's goal. Although spelling out a group's norms may feel awkward in a small group, knowing those expectations can eliminate confusion and misunderstandings down the road.

For example, team members might want to say out loud that each meeting will begin at the agreed-upon time, that participants will not grade homework during the team meeting, but that participants are allowed to bring snacks and drinks to the meeting table.

For more about setting a group's norms, see the Aug./Sept. 1999 issue of *Tools for Schools*, www.nsd.org/library/publications/tools/tools8-99rich.cfm.

Possibilities Phase

This is a time to get as many options on the table as possible. During the possibilities phase, the facilitator is responsible

for ensuring that the group does not begin evaluating individual options which could damage the process.

3. Brainstorm options.

After the team has done its reading, interviews, and examined the necessary data, it is ready to identify various options for action. Participants are encouraged to let the ideas flow without trying to sell or explain their ideas.

Several styles of brainstorming could be used: free-for-all where everyone verbally shares ideas; a round-robin in which each participant takes a turn and shares one idea; journaling in which participants write down all of their ideas and then share with the entire group.

Whichever form of brainstorming is chosen, all ideas eventually are announced publicly and written on a flip chart.

4. Dialogue about the options.

Once a list of options is created, the group spends time ensuring that each participant understands each option. Participants ask clarifying questions and share examples to ensure that everyone understands each option fully. The group avoids evaluating the options.

Probing Phase

Where the first two phases open up and broaden the decision-making process, the final two phases narrow possibilities by analyzing and eliminating options.

5. Eliminate unacceptable options.

Quickly eliminate options for which team members have little enthusiasm or support. Invite participants to vote by placing sticky dots next to their favorite options. (Calculate one third the total number of options on the list. If there are 15 options on the list, give each participant five sticky dots.)

6. Develop criteria for evaluating remaining options.

As the team moves into decision making, participants must be clear about the standards that will be used to evaluate the acceptability of each option. "A group will reach consensus more easily when all par-

ticipants apply the same criteria," Hoffman said.

Using the tool on Page 3, guide the group through an activity to name criteria and then apply those criteria to the options it has identified.

"This process make visual what people are thinking so the team does not fall into the trap of the loudest voices making the choices," Hoffman said.

8. Discuss the options.

Using the Levels of Yes and No tool on Page 4, the facilitator guides the team through a discussion of each remaining option. Any team member who does not support an option should state his or her concern. The team responds by trying to problem solve those concerns. The discussion continues until most of the team supports the option.

Declaring Phase

When an option has achieved the support of most of the group and everyone has been able to influence the choices, the group moves into the declaring phase. In this phase, the group takes the final steps to ensure that everyone has been heard, knows they have been heard, and agrees to move together into implementation.

9. Determine levels of support.

Before participants can determine their level of commitment to an option, they must understand what the group expects for each level of commitment.

Create a chart with categories labeled "minimal support," "moderate support," "proactive support," and "maximum support." Solicit and chart ideas from the group about what each level of support looks like.

10. Declare the group's decision.

The facilitator reminds the group that it has agreed on a definition of consensus and that the group has reached a consensus on the option it will pursue.

Using the Commitment Continuum on Page 6, invite participants to declare their level of support for implementing the option.

Criteria Sort

Purpose: Establish the criteria that will be used to evaluate the proposed options and apply the criteria to those options.

Materials: Sticky dots in three different colors, flip chart, felt-tip markers.

Time: Two hours.

Directions

1. Invite participants to name the criteria for evaluating the options for their situation. Write those on a flip chart.

Examples of criteria: Can be done with existing budget, offers support for teachers who want to differentiate their instruction, or compatible with our existing course textbook and materials.

(Note: A small group may want to work in pairs for this step; larger groups may want to break down into smaller groups of five or six.)

2. After the group lists possible criteria, give participants nine sticky dots in three different colors. Identify one color for each category and ask participants to label them as follows:

Criteria Weight

3 = Critical: An option must match this criterion if we are to reach our goal.

2 = Important: An option should match this criterion if possible.

1 = Would be nice: An option might meet this criterion but it is not essential.

3. Invite participants to use their dots to place three criteria in each category.

4. Tabulate the results and create new lists of the “critical,” “important,” and “would be nice” criteria. (The group should discuss any criteria that fall in the gaps between two categories. If necessary, the facilitator may have the group vote again on disputed criteria.)

5. Bring forward the list of options that the group created. Post the list of critical criteria next to the options.

6. Give participants another supply of sticky dots and invite them to label each option as follows:

Criteria Match

5 = Matches the criteria

3 = Somewhat matches the criteria

1 = Does not match the criteria

7. On a flip chart, create a larger version of the chart example below and fill out each square on the chart for each option.

8. Create a list that ranks the options from highest to lowest.

► DEFINITION
Criteria are standards or rules used to evaluate something.

	Option #1: Provide teachers with one hour of daily team time			
CRITERIA	Criteria Weight		Criteria Match	Criteria Total
Must be done within existing budget	3	x	5	= 15
		x		=

Source: Based on recommendations included in *Putting Sense into Consensus*, by Connie Hoffman and Judy Ness (VISTA Associates, 1998).

Levels of Yes and No

Purpose: Provides a visual display of the positions held by team members, identifies concerns, and determines how to address those concerns.

Time: 70 to 90 minutes.

Materials: Flip chart, felt-tip markers, 3-inch sticky notes (two per team member).

Directions

1. Clarify the option the team is considering. Write the option on the top of a flip chart page. Ask team members to pair up and share their understanding of the option, checking to see if all team members can paraphrase the option being considered. *Time: 5 minutes.*
2. Facilitate a dialogue and discussion about the option. (See descriptions). *Time: 20 minutes.*
3. Re-clarify the option. Read the statement from Step 1 and ask if everyone still agrees that this really is the option being considered. If the answer is yes, the group proceeds. If the answer is no, repeat the process again, beginning with Step 1. *Time: 5 minutes.*
4. When the group agrees that the option statement is accurate, replicate the chart below on the flip chart underneath the option statement. Walk the group through the Levels of Yes and No, explaining the following:

Levels of Yes and No

10 = Absolutely yes

9 = Strongly yes

8 = Yes

7 = Somewhat in favor

6 = Mildly in favor

5 = Mildly opposed

4 = Somewhat opposed

3 = No

2 = Strongly no

1 = Absolutely no

Dialogue vs. discussion

Dialogue:

Trying to understand. Everyone suspends their judgments and opinions and is willing to be influenced by others. Team members paraphrase frequently, ask clarifying questions, and listen both accurately and empathetically.

Discussion:

Trying to influence. Group members state their opinions and argue for their point of view.

Continued on next page

Levels of Yes and No

Continued from previous page

5. Ask team members to think about the situation and choose the number that best represents their current opinions about the option. Ask each participant to record his or her number on one of the sticky notes and to write a brief rationale for his or her rating. (Signing notes is helpful but should not be required.) *Time: 5 minutes.*
6. Have participants place the sticky notes on the flip chart in a column next to the number that matches their rating. The resulting bar graph will provide a visual display of the team's opinions. *Time: 2 minutes.*
7. Read the statements of rationale from all of the sticky notes. Ask participants to listen analytically, looking for categories of rationale as well as similarities and differences among the categories. *Time: 5-10 minutes.*
8. Focus the team on the rationale statements that express a concern, beginning with those mentioned most frequently. Examine concerns from both the Yes and the No sides. *Time: 5 minutes.*
9. Invite participants to speak for each side of the option, beginning with the No side. Invite questions from the participants. Remind all participants to stay open to the influence of others. *Time: 15-30 minutes.*
10. When everyone has been heard, repeat Steps 5 and 6. Ask the team to evaluate the Levels of Yes and No chart to determine if "most" has been reached by either side. If "most" has been reached by the No side, then the option is rejected. If "most" has been reached by the Yes side, then the team moves to the declaring phase. Regardless of the results, label the chart page with the date and retain as part of the group memory. *Time: 10 minutes.*

Group Memory

The "group memory" is a public record of a team's discussion on any topic. The facilitator should maintain this record on a flip chart that is visible to all participants and which can be reduced to notes that can be distributed if needed.

The facilitator can refer to the document to assure an individual that a concern has been heard and therefore keep the discussion moving along. The team also can refer to the group memory for a reminder about how it reached its decision or provide it as documentation for its work.

Source: *Putting Sense into Consensus*, by Connie Hoffman and Judy Ness (VISTA Associates, 1998).

Commitment Continuum

Purpose: Display the distribution of agreement with the option and the level of contribution participants are willing to give to implementation of the decision.

Time: 75 minutes.

Materials: Flip chart containing the Commitment Continuum (prepare in advance), two sticky dots per participant.

Directions

- On the flip chart or on a transparency, record the option being considered. Facilitate a dialogue to ensure that all participants have a common understanding of the option.
Time: 5 minutes.
- Remind the participants that they have reached the group's decision through consensus and now they are identifying their level of commitment to implement this decision.
Time: 5 minutes.
- Clarify the meaning of the Levels of Yes and No. *Time: 5 minutes.*
- Give participants two sticky dots each and ask them to place one of the dots on the number that matches their current level of agreement or disagreement regarding the option.
Time: 5 minutes.
- Compute and announce the results indicated by the dots. Again, confirm that most of the participants agree with the option. *Time: 5 minutes.*
- Review the Levels of Contribution and Support for the option. *Time: 5 minutes.*
- Invite participants to place their second dot on the number that represents their willingness to support and contribute to the successful implementation of the decision. *Time: 5 minutes.*
- Debrief the results indicated by the dots. Are there sufficient dots in the maximum and proactive sections to ensure implementation? If not, the team needs to problem solve this situation. It is essential that some team members are willing to lead the implementation and work proactively to successfully implement the decision. Once there are sufficient dots in these two categories, the team's decision is declared and the team can develop its action plan for implementation. *Time: 15 minutes.*

Commitment Continuum

Level of Yes/No		Level of Contribution and Support
Strong agreement <i>I think this is the best option.</i>	10 9 8	Maximum support <i>I will lead/facilitate the planning, implementation, and evaluation.</i>
Agreement <i>I think this is a workable option.</i>	7 6	Proactive support <i>I'll help plan and carry out the comprehensive implementation.</i>
Disagreement <i>I have some concerns.</i>	5 4 3	Moderate support <i>As an individual, I will look for things I can do to support implementation.</i>
Strong disagreement <i>I think this is a mistake.</i>	2 1	Minimal support <i>As an individual, I'll do what is necessary to support the decision.</i>

Source: *Putting Sense into Consensus*, by Connie Hoffman and Judy Ness (VISTA Associates, 1998).

Learning more about consensus

The Adaptive School: A Sourcebook for Developing Collaborative Groups

Robert Garmston and Bruce Wellman. Norwood, Mass.: Christopher-Gordon Publishers, 1999.

A guide for improving collaboration with a goal of improving student achievement. Available through the NSDC Online Bookstore, store.nsd.org. Item B80. Price: \$57 members, \$71.25 nonmembers.



“Consensus: Tapping Into a Powerful Decision-Making Tool”

Joan Richardson, *Tools for Schools*, Oct./Nov. 1997.

Presents an overview of why and when consensus can work with a group. Includes four tools to help a group work on consensus.

Available online at www.nsd.org/library/publications/tools/tools10-97rich.cfm

Difficult Conversations: How to Discuss What Matters Most

Douglas Stone, et al. New York: Penguin, 2000.

The authors, associated with Harvard Law School and the Harvard Project on Negotiation, describe how employing the techniques of dialogue can improve the quality of conversations and, ultimately, group interactions, including decision making. Check your library or local bookstore.

Getting to Yes

Roger Fisher, William Ury, and Bruce Patton. New York: Penguin, 1991.

Classic guide to the art of negotiating both personal and professional disputes. Presents concise strategies to help all size groups reach mutually acceptable agreements. Check your library or local bookstore.

How the Way We Talk Can Change the Way We Work

Robert Kegan and Lisa Lahey. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2000.

An intensely practical book that offers readers a guide to how changing our language can improve our relationships and thus our ability to reach agreement with others more easily.

Available through the NSDC Online Bookstore, store.nsd.org. Item B135. Price: \$25.60 members, \$32 nonmembers.



How to Make Meetings Work

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. Check your library or local bookstore.

Skilled Facilitator

Roger Schwarz. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1994.

Practical guide for leading groups effectively, including many suggestions regarding decision making. Check your library or local bookstore.

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Ask Dr. Developer



Dr. Developer has all the answers to questions that staff developers ask.

(At least he thinks he does!)

Consensus isn't right for every decision

Q *Operating on consensus always sounds like an ideal way for a group to reach a decision. But is it really practical? Does it work with every group and every decision?*

A Have you ever been in a group that tried to use consensus to decide which flowers to plant in the school yard or which gift to buy for the school secretary? If you have, then you know that some decisions do not lend themselves to consensus.

Fortunately, Judy Ness and Connie Hoffman, who provided the framework for consensus used in this issue, have identified several questions that a group can answer to help determine if consensus is right for it.

1. Does the team have the authority to make this decision? If no, the team may still be able to provide input or draft a recommendation. If yes, move to the next question.

2. Does the team have the skill to promote open communication and open disagreement? If no, the team should focus

on developing such skills. If yes, move to the next question.

3. Does the team have a strong, adequate knowledge base about the situation that requires a decision? If no, delegate the decision to an expert or provide information to increase the team's expertise. If yes, move to the next question.

4. Is the team willing to spend the necessary time to reach consensus on this situation? If no, delegate the decision to one member or to a staff person. If yes, move to the next question.

5. If the answer is no to any of the following questions, consider a simply majority or delegate to one member or a staff person. If the answer is yes, use consensus:

- Will the decision be long lasting?
- Will the decision establish or change a priority goal for the team?
- Will the decision change our way of doing day-to-day business?
- Will the decision significantly impact all team members?

This is the final issue of Tools for the 2003-04 school year. The next issue of Tools will arrive in August.

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