

Guidelines for Using Consensus

Tips for the Facilitator

1. Summarize frequently.

This means restating the sense of the discussion, including points of agreement, shared concerns, and points of disagreement.

2. Ask if your summary is accurate and captures critical issues.
3. Ask for proposals (suggestions, solutions) that take into account the shared concerns and goals of the group.

Don't invite debate at this point, but rather clarifying questions and discussion. Try to generate as many alternative approaches as possible. Encourage the group to be creative and not to assume that offered suggestions are mutually exclusive.

4. Try to summarize and articulate the sense of the group.

This is a time to try to blend and mesh the offered solutions, and to articulate any apparent conflicts among them.

5. Ask if there are objections or concerns about specific suggestions, approaches, or options.

This is the time for debate. Try to keep the group focused on its common goals, concerns, and agreements without minimizing the significance of the differences and conflicting points of view. Try to get at underlying concerns, needs, and interests that are the basis for any particular "position."

6. Ask if other approaches, suggestions, or proposals could handle the concerns and conflicts better than those already being considered.
7. If you can, offer a summary of the discussion that captures what the group consensus seems to be.

This is the time when it is important to identify

elements of the discussion and various proposals that enjoy complete or widespread agreement and to validate agreement on these points with the group. If these points can be separated from the areas of disagreement, then even if consensus cannot be reached on all points, the group still has agreement on some things and can move forward.

8. Offer a summary of areas of disagreement.

It is important to try to capture the essential concerns or ideas that seem to be in conflict, articulate the best thinking of the group so far as to how to proceed, and ask if anyone feels strongly enough to block that approach if nothing better can be found.

If the answer is "no" (in other words, no one is willing to block the proposed approaches), ask if there is enough support to proceed now, or if the preference of the group would be to give the issue a rest to see if anyone can come up with a better alternative. (This approach is driven entirely by urgency and how much time is on the agenda for further consideration.)

If dissent is strong enough to block the decision, review the areas of agreement again, remind the group of what has already been decided, and make a decision about whether to table the item for further discussion later, or to ask for another round of proposals that address the concerns of the dissenters. Remember, people cannot block decisions simply on the basis of personal preference. Dissent must be based on belief that there is a conflict based on prior agreements, values, and/or goals, or disagreement about the expected outcomes of a particular approach to a problem.

If there is not time for further discussion and it is not possible for the decision to be postponed, at least identify how the decision will be made and how the voice of dissent will be included in the outcome. Make sure there is general acceptance of the necessity and fairness of this approach to the conflict.

9. Review decisions that have been made and clarify task assignments.

This is often the place where disagreements really get handled, that is, when people have to back up their points of view with commitment to act.

Questions and Statements for Improving the Discussion

To Broaden Participation

“Would anyone care to offer suggestions or facts we need to better our understanding of the problem or topic?”

“Now that we have heard from a number of people, would others who have not spoken like to add some of their ideas?”

“How do the ideas presented thus far sound to the rest of you? What do the rest of you think about these suggestions?”

To Limit Participation

“We appreciate your contributions. In order to keep this discussion moving, we need to hear from some of the others. Would those of you who have not spoken like to make some remarks?”

“Does anyone have any comments in addition to those already covered?”

“Thank you for your input. We have discussed this particular issue at length, and to effectively come to a decision, we need to move on to the matter of ...”

To Focus Discussion and Gather Evidence

“Getting back to the agenda, let’s focus our discussion on defining the problem and save the discussion on possible solutions until a little later.”

“Let’s summarize what has happened thus far to ensure that we all understand what has been agreed upon.”

“What has happened, specifically, that has convinced you this is the best approach?”

“Has this solution worked for other groups or organizations?”

“Am I right in sensing agreement on these points ... ?”

To Help the Group Move Along

“Have we spent enough time on this phase of the problem to allow us to move on?”

“Have we discussed this issue enough so that we can take a vote and shift our attention to the next item?”

“What have we accomplished in our discussion up to this point?”

“Since we cannot reach a decision at this meeting, what are some of the points we need to take up at the next one?”

“What are some points that need further study before we convene again?”

Tips for Group Members

1. Make sure you understand what is needed for each agenda item.
2. Listen, stay focused, and pay attention.

Don’t berate yourself if your attention wanders, but it really helps if everyone present pays attention to what is going on, and being said.

3. Think about your motive and purpose before you speak.

Are you: Introducing a new idea? Raising or reinforcing a concern about the topic? Adding new facts?

4. Avoid repeating yourself.

Remember that just because someone disagrees with you, it doesn’t necessarily mean that they misunderstand your point of view. If you think you are being misunderstood, ask someone else to paraphrase.

5. Don’t be reluctant to state preferences or to disagree, but remember that your preference alone is not sufficient to block a decision.

Your silence will be taken as consent; if you have a concern, the group needs to hear it.

6. It is OK to attempt to articulate the group consensus if you think you are hearing one emerge.
7. Remember that even though you have good ideas, they may not work for this group, and the group may be able to generate even better ideas with your input.

8. Don't be reluctant to ask questions.

Even if it looks like something is perfectly obvious to everyone else, if it is not clear to you — ask. Chances are someone else will benefit from the clarification, and even if everyone else is completely clear, you can't bring your best thinking to the process unless you understand what is being said.

More Tips for Facilitators

1. Make sure that everyone who wants to speak gets a chance to speak.
2. Remember that you can use pairs and threes to increase “air time” for everyone.
3. Remind people that even though they fear the consequences of a decision because there is not enough information to reliably predict the outcome, they can try something for a while to see if it works.
4. When people cannot arrive at an agreement, encourage the group to make sure that every option or idea is being considered.
5. Encourage group members to voice concerns and different points of view.
6. Make sure that the sense of the discussion is getting captured in writing in a way that everyone can see. This reduces repetition and confusion.

Source: *Guidelines for Consensus*, prepared by the National Rural Economic Development Institute, Dick Gardner

Source: *Facilitation Resources*. Volume 5. Making Group Decisions. (BU-7434-S), University of Minnesota Extension, 2001.