

# NEW GUIDELINES FOR CONSENSUS DECISION MAKING

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## **DEFINITION**

Consensus is defined as each individual involved in the decision-making process being at least 70% comfortable with the solutions or decisions being set up for action, and willing to give the consensus decision 100% of their individual support after the decision has been agreed upon.

Please note: a consensus decision is not the same as a unanimous decision in which every individual must be 100% comfortable with the decision being made. Neither is consensus the same as a “majority vote” decision in which there are winners and losers, even though the group may use “straw polls” occasionally to gauge how close to consensus they are.

## **GROUND RULES**

If any individual is not 70% comfortable with any aspect of the decision, they accept the obligation to share the basis of their discomfort with others if it is clear to them, or to indicate, as best they can, the issues around which their discomfort revolves. The rest of the group commits itself to listen carefully to the reasons for the discomfort so that the proposed decision can be modified, re-phrased, tweaked, or adjusted until every individual is at least 70% comfortable with the action to be taken. Once decided, everyone agrees to give the decision 100% of their support (i.e. no badmouthing of the decision outside the room with others is permitted later). Everyone is accountable for support.

## **REQUIREMENTS FOR CONSENSUS**

Every member must be committed to arriving at a decision, be a willing participant in the decision-making process, and be willing to accept the needs/views of others involved. If only one member of the group is not willing, a consensus decision is not possible. In this case a decision must be made in another way such as by voting, executive action, etc.

To achieve consensus, it is not required that every member be 100% comfortable, just 70%.

Consensus has been achieved when each individual involved overtly signals that they are at least 70% comfortable with the decision or agreement being addressed. A group chairman or facilitator should look directly at each individual and ask them to show a sign (head nodding, thumbs-up, etc.) that they are at least 70% comfortable with the decision. Shaking of the head, thumbs-down, etc., means the individual is not at least 70% comfortable and the group must now search for the reasons and find a way to adjust the decision so that it achieves the 70% threshold. Do not let anyone fail to show an overt sign of agreement or discomfort while you’re looking at them. People will generally honor a decision when they know they were seen agreeing to it. Anyone remaining silent or passive is not sufficient to claim genuine consensus. Passivity, in this process, does not mean assent; it means escape (from accountability). Using clear and quick signals also speeds up the consensus-building process. It’s tough to get consensus, but once achieved, it tends to not come unraveled.

## **CONDITIONS WHEN CONSENSUS IS APPROPRIATE, USEFUL, OR WORTH THE TROUBLE**

- When continuing support and commitment for the decision is essential.
- When different ideas and approaches are useful or necessary to decide.
- When exact circumstances are unknown or ambiguous and intuition or guessing is needed.
- When participation for ownership is as or more important than technical correctness.