

“Building Communities...A Mountaintop Experience”

Consensus decision making for outdoor leaders. You're on a trip and want to maximize the involvement of your participants, by including them in decision making. When and why might you use a consensus approach? How can you help facilitate this process for your group? What happens when most of the crew are in agreement but a few are not? We'll share our knowledge and practice through role plays. Consensus can help build community!

- **Sandy Kohn;** Sandy is the Director of the Venture Program at UNC Charlotte where he has worked since 1984. He has also worked for Outward Bound, NOLS and other programs. As a long time Quaker, he has used consensus decision making in a variety of settings.

Objectives: Participants will understand
basic **theory** and **practice** of consensus decision making
and will leave with some **specific tools for how to facilitate** consensus.

Basic Outline:

Define consensus - consensus is : ‘ a general agreement’

“the judgment arrived at by most of those concerned.”

a process of decision making in which everyone involved is willing to consent to the decision before the group can adopt it.

Typically not total satisfaction by everyone. Rather, decision is acceptable enough that willing to support it. It may or may not allow an individual to “block” a decision.

It does involve the practice of **“listening** to everyone’s ideas and taking **all concerns into consideration** in an attempt to find the **most universally acceptable decision possible at a particular time.**” (from Building United Judgment: A Handbook for Consensus Decision Making.)

Why use it: Consensus decision making can maximize involvement and fosters empowerment and participants learn responsibility and practice democracy. Consensus decision making **also builds community since everyone’s views are treated with respect.**

Kinds of decision making:

- Staff / leader decides (alone,)
- Staff / leader decides (with input)
- most vocal decide / a few decide for group
- vote with majority deciding
- informal go with flow
- consensus

When and why might you use a consensus format?

- Unity of purpose,
- equal access to power.
- Ownership - autonomy of the group from external hierarchical structures,
- sufficient time,
- safety,
- support,
- willing to attend to process,
- willingness to attend to attitudes,
- don’t want any losers

How can you help facilitate this process for your group?

Environment:

A close circle,
aware of barriers (sound, light, etc.)

Opportunities for all to speak,
invite input,

clear statement of what has to be decided

look at needs or goals vs. preferred solutions

consider all aspects (including impact on group, individuals, others, environment, etc),

thumbs to test,

worship sharing – not debate, share info and try to weigh it all,

identify where unity,

seek to understand differences,

look for win/win - the third way.

What happens when most of the crew are in agreement but a few are not?

consensus decision or consensus seeking decision – if few in opposition, continue to seek clarity about why, what their concerns are until really understand, then can incorporate those views or choose to move ahead despite them.

Options: Small group with strong advocates for opposite opinions meet to find a compromise or third way.

1. Stand aside,
2. Record opposition
3. Move forward without total unity
4. Wait
5. Choose another alternative

Common problems:

Polarized **factions**: based on **philosophical split** – explore the underlying values

Polarized **factions**: based on **long-term unresolved conflicts** – explore the underlying conflicts

Endless discussion-

Competitive, too strongly identified with their own idea

Issue too unwieldy

Members have hidden agendas

Discussion meanders due to lack of facilitation

Low quality decision –

Insufficient information

Decisions incomplete- lack follow-through

Decisions passed despite underlying disagreements- fear conflict

Time pressure causes to rush too much

Incomplete participation by some

Non-participation by some

Personal characteristics (too shy, poor communication skills)

Burn out

Some lack trust or fear conflict

Lack of commitment

A few dominate discussion –

power imbalance

some just talk too much or are not aware of how much space they take up

A group member apparently won't cooperate

Test the appearance,
acknowledge ,
help communicate actual needs and identify concerns

Possible Decisions: Which decision making process to use?

examples from group

which path at fork in trail

slow hikers and fast hikers – divide up group?

to run a difficult rapid or portage around it

deciding on who will be leader of the day

whether to continue on to planned campsite (in dark) vs. stopping before that (and having further to travel the next day),

whether to continue with planned route or consider other alternatives (climb near by peak rather than move to next site),

whether to allow skinny dipping at swimming hole,

to bring meat or eat as vegetarians on a trip

Deciding on sleeping arrangements – who in what tents- or just gender divisions.

To allow 1 bottle of wine for the evening meal following a day on the river - on an adult whitewater kayaking trip with 8 participants and 2 staff.

Choose one to use consensus with in this group- play your real self and your real values and beliefs

And proces of choosing which