

What constitutes consensus?

Comparing Consensus to other decision-making techniques?¹

In team processes, final decisions can be made in a number of ways:

1. **Command Decisions.** Here the team lead, or expert, makes the decision. This is most effective when a quick decision needs to be made, in which case it is critical that the leader share the decision, and the rationale with the rest of the team. The downside is that you may not have the 'best' decision as you did not seek expertise that resides in the team.
2. **Individual Consultation.** Here the team lead still makes the final decision but (s)he consults a member of the team prior to making the decision. An advantage of this technique is 'time' as only one person is consulted allowing for some input from the team. A disadvantage is that there is no opportunity for group brainstorming. Buy-in from team members who were not consulted can also be a problem. The key here is for the leader to explain the criteria for the decision, how others will be involved and what input is needed. If possible, the leader should ask the individuals being consulted to meet with the larger team before meeting with the team leader so that (s)he has a broad perspective of the issue.
3. **Team Consultation.** Here the team lead makes the decision only after the entire group is consulted. Thus, this technique can facilitate group input, buy-in and commitment. However, the process will take more time and team members can become frustrated if they were consulted and the final decision appears to contradict the prevailing views expressed in the team consultation process. The key here is to explain the decision criteria, the type of feedback being sought, how this information will be used, and the fact the leader will make the final decision. Should the leader's decision appear to contradict the views expressed in the session, (s)he should go back to the team and express the rationale for the decision made.
4. **Majority Rules.** This is a decision making process where all parties, including the leader, have an equal say in the final decision. In essence, it involves a 'vote' where the alternative that gets the most votes is implemented. An advantage of this technique is that it is quick and easily understood. The disadvantage is that people's rationales may not be heard if the vote is not accompanied with full discussion. The key here is to ensure that all team members understand the rules of voting and the alternatives being voted on.
5. **100% Agreement (Unanimous Agreement).** Again, all team members have equal say in the decision. In this case, all must agree on the final decision. Disadvantages include the time needed to make the decision and the fact that it may not be possible to get all members to have 100% agreement on one alternative. As such, this technique should only be used on rare occasions.

6. **Consensus.** In this technique, all team members have equal say in the final decision. The key here is that team members must be able to live with and support the final decision. Note that this does not mean that the final decision is each team member's first choice - they just need to be able to support the decision and live with it. Advantages of this technique are that it often ensures commitment and a higher quality decision which all members can support. Thus, this is often the preferred problem solving/decision making technique for teams. The downside is the time needed to make the decision.

Methods of Building Consensus²

In terms of methods for building consensus, we can examine three elements: guidelines that can be used during the decision making process; signs that can be used to recognize when the team may be at consensus; methods of testing for consensus.

Consensus Guidelines

The following guidelines can be used by teams and team leaders to facilitate the attainment of consensus:

1. Contribute to the discussion rather than defending your position
2. Seek out 'win-win' solutions that satisfy the needs/concerns of all team members
3. Use active listening skills and summarize what others are saying
4. Seek to get the rationale for a person's view
5. Avoid voting or averaging to get an answer
6. Don't be afraid to disagree - address your differences in terms of the idea being presented, not the person

Signs of Consensus

During the dynamics of team discussions, it can be tough to see if the team is at consensus. If you can answer "yes" to the following questions, your team may well be at consensus.

1. Has each person been honestly listened to?
2. Have team members listened and understood the views of others?
3. Can each person summarize the alternative?
4. Do team members seem supportive of the alternative being discussed?
5. Has it been a while since any new opinions/views were presented?

Testing for Consensus

Once you sense that the team is at consensus, you need to test for it.

- **Thumbs Up.** This visual technique consists of people using one of the following gestures when the question "Do we have consensus" is called.
 - a. *Thumbs Up.* This 'hitch-hiking' sign is used when the team member is in full agreement with the alternative – it is their preferred choice.

- b. **Thumbs Neutral.** This sign is when the hand is in the same ‘hitch-hiker’ shape but the thumb points to the left. This means that the person can support and live with the alternative, but is not their preferred choice.
 - c. **Thumbs down.** Here the thumb is pointed to the ground to show that the person can neither live with nor support the alternative.
- Note: any ‘thumbs down’ means that there is no consensus. If all parties have ‘thumbs up’ or ‘thumbs neutral’ - you have consensus.

There may be times when you are near consensus and only a few people are not yet at consensus. While these people should not be made to feel bad, or forced into consensus, the following questions may help the team reach consensus:

1. There seems to be a number of people who support this alternative. What would it take for everyone to support it?
2. It’s important that we hear from all team members on this alternative. For those that do not support this option, what would you need in this alternative for it to be acceptable to you?

¹Beich, Elaine. (2001). *The Pfeiffer Book of Successful Team Building Tools: Best of the Annuals*. San Francisco: Pfeiffer-Jossey/Bass.

²Beich, Elaine. (2001).