

KOOTENAY BOUNDARY DIVISION OF FAMILY PRACTICE

CONSENSUS PROTOCOL

DEFINITION: Consensus decision-making is a group decision-making process that not only seeks the agreement of all or most participants, but also the resolution or mitigation of minority objections. Consensus is usually defined as meaning both general agreement, and the process of getting to such agreement.

Standards of Consensus:

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- A. **Inclusive:** As many stakeholders as possible should be involved in the consensus decision-making process.
- B. **Participatory:** The consensus process should actively solicit the input and participation of all decision-makers.
- C. **Cooperative:** Participants in an effective consensus process should strive to reach the best possible decision for the group and all of its members, rather than opt to pursue a majority opinion, potentially to the detriment of a minority.
- D. **Egalitarian:** All members of a consensus decision-making body should be afforded, as much as possible, equal input into the process. All members have the opportunity to table, amend, and veto or "block" proposals.
- E. **Solution-oriented:** An effective consensus decision-making body strives to emphasize common agreement over differences and reach effective decisions using compromise and other techniques to avoid or resolve mutually-exclusive positions within the group.

A Process for Consensus

1. **Thorough preparation:** Like any form of group decision-making, the consensus approach works much better if the decision-makers have the necessary information on which to base their decisions well in advance. This means distributing in advance agendas that identify required decisions and relevant reports and reference information that is clear and easily digested.
2. **Effective introduction by chair:** To introduce an item for decision-making, the chair of the meeting should identify the topic and let the group know that a decision is the expected outcome. He or she should invite questions of clarification about the supporting material, but should not yet entertain discussion about the issue.
3. **A clear proposal:** In consensus, one makes a "proposal" rather than a "motion" (though using the words "I move" rather than "I propose" should not be seen as an error that annuls the process). The proposal should be made in plain language. It is sometimes helpful to have the language of a proposal prepared in advance of the meeting (See Note C). The chair should ensure that the proposal is understood by all and invite wording clarification, if required.

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4. **No seconding required:** The consensus process does not require a seconder to a proposal (motion) in order for discussion to commence.
5. **Option of Immediate “vote”:** Though not necessary, it is often helpful for the chair to ask for a response to the proposal immediately after the proposal has been made. In this way, the chair can quickly ascertain the level of agreement or opposition to the proposal and manage the discussion accordingly. It may also have the advantage of discovering no opposition to the proposal, allowing immediate disposition.
6. **The “call” for consensus:** The chair calls for consensus on the proposal. Each member of the group should actively state her/his agreement or disagreement with the proposal, often by using a hand gesture or raising a coloured card, to avoid the group interpreting silence or inaction as agreement. One simple method is to use a “thumbs-up” sign for assent, “thumbs-down” for dissent, and closed fist or thumb horizontal for “stand aside”.

By “assenting”, the group member is indicating support for the proposal.

By “dissenting”, the group member is indicating opposition to the proposal.

By “standing aside”, the group member is indicating that s/he can live with the decision and/or does not wish to block the decision.

7. **The tally:** Basically, if there are no dissenters, the proposal is “accepted”. If there is even one dissenter, the proposal is “blocked”. Being “blocked” does not mean the proposal has been defeated; it means that the next step must be invoked.
8. **Identification and addressing of concerns:** If consensus is not achieved, the chair asks each dissenter to identify his or her concerns on the proposal and suggestions for addressing those concerns.
9. **Discussion:** Once each dissenter has presented her/his concerns, then the chair opens the discussion to the floor. If the concerns are minor, this process should be brief. If the concerns are significant and suggest wide differences in the group, the may be longer and more difficult.

In the consensus process, this step is at risk of being long and open to “speechifying” by some participants. To mitigate these risks the following strategies may be employed by the chair:

- a) Effective chairing of any meeting includes restricting the contribution of some talkative members and encouraging the participation of quieter

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members. The chair might impose time limits on the contributions of each member to the discussion.

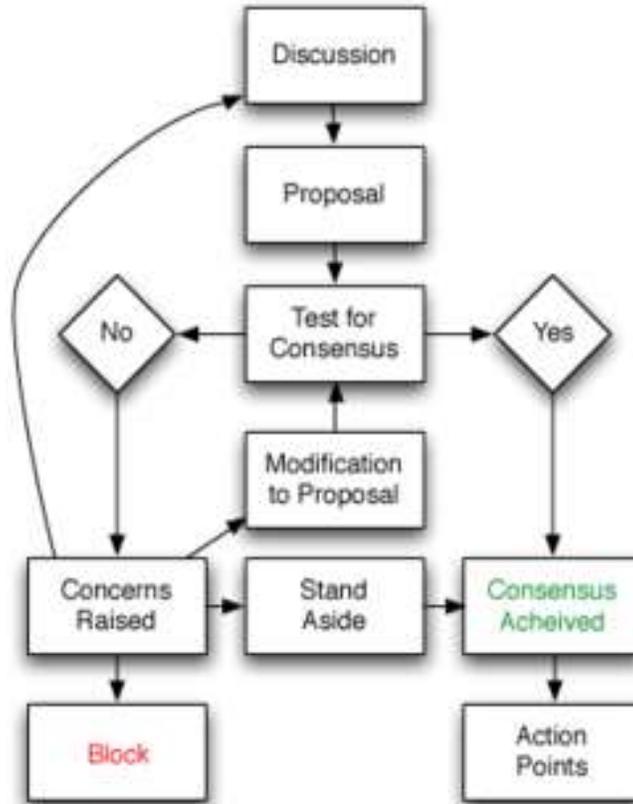
- b) Restrict the number of contributions of each participant. Each member of the group speaks once or twice; no more, no less.
- c) Refer the proposal back to a small group that includes both proponents and opponents. This group would be tasked with drafting a proposal that all can accept and bringing it back to a subsequent meeting.
- d) The chair may also set a time at which, if consensus is not reached, the proposal will be tabled for another day or put to a vote (See Note D).

10. Modification of the proposal: The proposal is amended, re-phrased or ridered (added to the proposal) in an attempt to address the concerns of the decision-makers. The process then returns to the call for consensus and the cycle is repeated until a satisfactory decision is made (the proposal is accepted or the proposal is withdrawn).

11. Minuting of the decision: The proposal is documented in the minutes as follows: (it was) "Proposed that.... Approved By Consensus (sometimes abbreviated to ABC). As with motions in conventional voting, there is no need to document the name of the sponsor of the proposal; in fact, it is not recommended.

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Flowchart of basic consensus decision-making process.

Notes

A. Benefits of Consensus

1. Better decisions: Through including the input of all stakeholders the resulting proposals may better address all potential concerns.
2. Better implementation: A process that includes and respects all parties, and generates as much agreement as possible sets the stage for greater cooperation in implementing the resulting decisions.
3. Better group relationships: A cooperative, collaborative group atmosphere can foster greater group cohesion and interpersonal connection.

B. The need for inclusion: Fundamental to the effectiveness of the consensus model is the willingness of the participants to listen to the concerns and positions of all members of the group and respect differences in perspective.

C. Proposal Development: For important decisions that may prove contentious, it helps to have discussions with members of the group to identify concerns and work together to address them before the meeting.

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D. Addressing an impasse. An impasse occurs when the group fails to reach consensus. The first recourse of the chair is to table the decision to a future meeting and refer the proposal to a small group as described in Step 9c above. If an immediate decision is required, but time or circumstance does not allow for the consensus process to be worked through in order to achieve true consensus, then the chair shall take the following steps:

1. Call for a vote and declare the Proposal accepted if there is a majority of supporters and no more than one dissenter (commonly known as “Consensus minus one”)
2. If a decision is still not reached, then another vote is held and the Proposal is declared accepted if a minimum of a two-thirds majority supports the proposal.
3. If step 2 fails, the proposal is defeated.

Note that addressing an impasse is a task requiring chairing skill that effectively reads the tenor of the group in relation to the urgency and importance of the decision facing the group. The chair may wish to take some time to discuss process with the group to ensure that using the above steps will produce an effective decision for the organization.