

## **When is Management by Consensus Appropriate and What Are the Alternatives**

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### **ABSTRACT**

One of the more misunderstood words in the English language is 'consensus', particularly as it is applied to decision making and management. It is often interpreted and used as though it means the same as 'unanimous', but is appropriately used to suggest general agreement or agreement in principle though not necessarily with all the details. This paper discusses how the term 'consensus' is positively and negatively applied to decision making and management, particularly of public bodies. For example, striving to make consensus the same as unanimous can often result in "no action" if there is strong opposition by even one party to the proposed action. Contrarily, members of groups that decide to perform actions by consensus will use the interpretation that it means unanimous, and thus force members that may have legitimate questions or concerns with rebuttals and accusations that they 'are against progress' or "not being a team player". This paper discusses different situations including the positive and negative aspects of the possible paths leading to the final decision when applying consensus as part of the decision-making process.

### **INTRODUCTION**

We often hear leaders of groups or activities say that they want to manage by consensus. However, in many cases, they do not know or understand the meaning of consensus and the benefits and detriments of its use in group politics and overall decision making. While the intent is to bring the participants to common ground, the results can unfortunately also be divisive and counter-productive if misapplied. This paper discusses what consensus is and is not along with how it has been used, can be used, and misused in the decision-making process.

### **DISCUSSION**

Let's start with the definitions of the word consensus;

- Encarta Dictionary – "Consensus" Broad Unanimity. General or widespread agreement among all of the members of a group.

**Consensus** has two common meanings. The first is a general agreement among the members of a given group, each of which exercises some discretion in decision making and follow-up action. The second is as a theory and practice of getting such agreements of achieving formal consensus. Therefore, consensus does not have the all inclusive meaning of 'unanimous'. Unanimous means that all the parties involved in the particular issue being considered agree in total with the

approach itself, the particular wording of the formal communication used by the group about the issue, and the approach approved by the group.

The stated intent of consensus is that the minority views are given as much consideration as the majority views and compromises are offered and accepted to make the final product palatable to all. However, the fact is that a consensus decision is often presented to the public as “We speak with one voice” inferring that everyone is in total agreement with what is presented. That impression is rarely true. A fairer interpretation of consensus would be that there is total agreement with the concept only – the individuals involved have differing opinions on the ways and means of implementation. For example, it is relatively easy to get consensus of a group on an overall issue or concern. It is hard to imagine any group not agreeing by consensus to the basic issues such as reducing DWI (Driving While Intoxicated) citations. However, achieving consensus on the actions that should be taken with respect to a basic issue is extremely difficult. The ability to either manage or make decisions by consensus is also affected by the roles and responsibilities of the group in question.

Consensus decision making is intended to deemphasize the role of factions or parties and promote the expression of individual voices. The method also increases the likelihood of unforeseen or creative solutions by proposing/discussing a wide range of ideas. It is also intended to give minority views a greater degree of consideration than in circumstances where a majority can take the action and enforce the decision without any further consultation with the minority voters.

The idea of management by consensus has many attributes and merits, however, the use or misuse of consensus as a decision-making tool can, and has caused the groups that have applied it, to become more contentious and less willing to work together. Thus, the first issue is how and when consensus should be applied to group activities.

Consensus is a good tool to use in the routine course of business for almost any group to evaluate whether a topic should be discussed/considered by the group. However the extent upon which consensus should be used by a group for formal decision making depends upon the mission or purpose of the group, the authority of the group, and the demographics of the group. If the group is an elected body wherein the members represent a constituency, then the use for consensus decision making is limited. Basically, for these types of groups – from Congress to town councils to school boards – the constituencies want to have a measure of what their representative did with respect to items or issues that come before the group. Therefore, they will expect their representatives to formally record their support or opposition to issues by open (public) voting in public meetings. While there are some ‘internal’ group activities conducted by elected bodies, such as agreeing on an agenda, where consensus can be used to facilitate proceedings, consensus decision making does not and should not be applied to the specific business items of this type of group.

## **APPLICATIONS**

The use of consensus for decision making by groups that are made up of appointed members is greatly dependent upon the authority of the group. If the group has regulatory authority, for example, a licensing commission or a panel of judges, most people would generally agree that to

ensure the body over which they have authority, the decision-making process of those groups should be conducted by recorded votes. This would apply to, for example, a specific group such as professional engineers or a specific political entity such as a state. For groups that do not have any regulatory authority, such as DOE Site Specific Advisory Boards (SSABs), consensus decision making is acceptable as long as the consensus decision making process used enables all the participants to be heard. It also can be used to give advisory groups more credence or recognition with the entities that they are advising. In the case of the DOE SSABs, they have no direct power or authority over DOE with respect to forcing the DOE to accept or even consider their recommendations. Therefore, the strategy of using consensus decision-making (i.e., speaking with one voice) gives the recommendations of the SSABs more weight than if their recommendations were approved by a split decision. However, as discussed later, using the consensus approach to develop/justify a poorly-conceived recommendation can result in more damage than the presentation of a decision or recommendation that is not 'unanimous'.

Even groups whose roles and responsibilities require public voting for their decision-making processes make extensive uses of consensus in their day-to-day activities. Generally, the development of the proposed action or decision is done via a consensus approach where the group uses staff or subgroups to evaluate the issue in depth and develop the recommended approach. While this application of consensus can be considered limited due to the knowledge, experience, and bias of the persons involved in developing the approach, that is not necessarily the case since most groups have the ability to access the opinions of subject matter experts and even convene panels of experts, who in turn, provide their opinions as the consensus of the group. Thus, most items considered for approval by groups have been developed via the consensus mechanism even though the approval is by a common voting process.

The concept of consensus is also very useful to assist decision making in public meetings sponsored by any group with the objective of seeking input and opinion of citizens. Ideally, the public in attendance represents a reasonable cross-section of the overall public that is affected by the topic(s) of the meeting. If that is the case, which can generally be assessed by having attendees indicated who they represent, then after open discussion on the topic(s), it is reasonable to try to determine if the public in attendance can reach consensus on any or all matters discussed. However, it is essential that both the group sponsoring the meeting and the public in attendance understand that the group is not bound to conform to any of the consensus (or lack thereof) reached by the public during the meeting.

Regardless of how and when it is used, managing the consensus decision-making process is the single key element that can contribute to either its success or failure. Since the intent of the process is to make sure all voices are heard and all viewpoints considered equally, the management or leadership approach to the consensus decision-making process must be that of a facilitator, and not as an advocate for or against the issue or topic being considered. However, it is rare that the leaders of a group are willing or able to assign themselves a role that guides the process rather than using their position to pursue and promote specific measures that they favor. It is also rare that the group members make the effort to learn and apply the individual facilitation skills that are essential to guarantee the success of the consensus decision-making process.

Even if the management of a group is able to operate as facilitators, the consensus decision-making process can be much more difficult than that of a simple-majority-party leader unless there is general trust and respect amongst the group members. For a proponent of any given alternative, reducing objections to their plan by eliciting information or preferences from proponents of other alternatives is difficult if people distrust each other. In addition, the consensus decision-making approach enables members to effectively stall actions of the group by refusing to negotiate, compromise, and even voting against the action. For these reasons, some organizations have abandoned consensus decision making for simple majority, judging that the difficulty of building a process to formally weigh all of these factors is not worth it, and that these factors can be handled better informally (i.e. in offline discussions before and after debate) than through the process of consensus itself, at the risk of creating a *de facto* 'committee' that makes the real decisions.

An important issue for groups to consider before considering a consensus decision-making process, is the feasibility of building up sufficient trust among participants, the willingness of participants to learn facilitation skills, and whether or not these are compatible with the operational structure of the group. The DOE SSABs management structure of a chairperson who hierarchically controls the group's consensus decision-making activities will only work if the chairperson could be expected to sincerely respect the consensus decision-making process.

## **RISKS**

There are several risks associated with relying too heavily on the opinions of the public in attendance. First, the public in attendance may not be representative of the public that is affected, so their opinions are effectively the 'minority' opinion (i.e., silent majority and/or tail wagging the dog). A recent example of using a biased audience consensus involved the Northern New Mexico Citizens Advisory Board (NNMCAB) to justify an impractical recommendation that Los Alamos National Laboratory no longer dispose any radioactive wastes on site. This recommendation stemmed from a public forum (e.g., the Area G forum) that was held in Santa Fe and attended by approximately 100 people. The choice of the venue in Santa Fe essentially ensured that the majority of the people attending would represent citizens groups with a pre-established bias towards continuing operations of Los Alamos National Laboratory (LANL), much less radioactive waste disposal, regardless of how safe it was demonstrated to be in compliance with all state and federal requirements. Additionally, the numbers in attendance represented less than 1% of the public affected by operations at LANL. Applying consensus decision making based upon this type of group resulted in a biased view being presented to DOE. The result was a loss of credibility of the NNMCAB with the DOE who knew the NNMCAB had not attempted to achieve a truly representative public viewpoint.

Another issue with consensus is how it is determined. For most people, consensus does not mean any type of recorded vote, but rather determined by a show of hands or a voice vote. Also, it is vague enough to allow the person presiding over meetings where consensus is used for decision making to allow them to decide that 'general agreement' does not mean unanimous. Therefore, if there are 'only' a couple of dissenters, then the group has reached consensus. Hence, consensus can be used to prevent the views of the minority from being heard and being a part of the meeting record.

Consensus is generally 'sold' as a method to achieve the purpose of the group without the potential arguments and divisiveness that occur when actions or ideas are put to a vote. However, consensus decision making could result in increased dissention and tension in a group because group members make more extreme decisions compared to their prior individual positions (1, 2). This could potentially have beneficial results on team decisions (i.e., enhance commitment and conviction), or detrimental effects (i.e., escalate towards greater risk or greater conservative behaviors). The main reason that consensus decision making may cause more long-term dissatisfaction among group members than the use of the decision-making by vote method is primarily due to how the inputs from the group members are considered. Achieving consensus requires serious treatment of every group member's considered opinion. If that does not happen, then the member is frustrated and sometimes put in a position of 'grudging agreement' rather than being singled out as one of the members holding up the action. Basically, the idea of consensus is used by the sponsor of an action or the chairperson of a group to get his/her way. Those in opposition are made to feel as though they should not be holding up the work of the group, and to some extent, that they are not 'smart enough' to have an opinion on the topic at hand. This is particularly true of the DOE SSABs where most of the members do not have a strong background in environmental compliance.

An example of how the misuse of the consensus approach can be detrimental to the overall performance of a board is in the methods used to present and approve recommendations. The usual practice of most 'advisory' groups, such as the DOE SSABs, is to prepare a recommendation, move it for a vote by the members, and then open it for discussion based on the recommendations. The aim of the discussion is to clarify the recommendations and to get a sense as to whether or not the group will approve the aforementioned recommendations. In the NNM CAB, the general practice was for people to propose revisions to the recommendations, and for the members to approve or disapprove the revisions by voice vote. However, on more than one occasion, the recommendations required major revisions before they could be considered. On those occasions, a 'committee' was formed to revise the recommendations and all of the board members were invited to provide their suggested language changes to that committee. Unfortunately, the committee then became the 'authority' and decided which of the suggested changes to include in the final revision. As a result, members did not feel that their suggested changes were given serious consideration and became less inclined to contribute, i.e., why bother when one's views are not given consideration?

Another major failing with the use of consensus for decision making is the misinterpretation that consensus means unanimous. For the NNM CAB, for example, the bylaws indicated that all board actions were to be approved by majority vote except recommendations to DOE, which were to be approved by 'consensus'. Also, the bylaws further stated that if consensus cannot be reached, then the board would submit a majority and minority report. Essentially, the bylaw writers wanted unanimous approval (or 'general agreement') of the recommendations, but then indicated that all it really took to pass a recommendation was a simple majority as evidenced by the requirement for majority and minority reports.

The dichotomy is that the NNM CAB rules also required that a formal motion be made for approval of a recommendation requiring a call for a vote on the recommendation, and that it must be approved by a majority in order to be sent to DOE. Thus, the term 'consensus' as used in this instance, appears to indicate that recommendations are to be unanimously approved by all

members. In fact, it was publicly stated that the board chairperson wanted all recommendations to be approved 'unanimously' as he did not want to submit minority reports to DOE. The net result of that statement was that several board members felt that there was no use in objecting to recommendations since they would be viewed as 'obstructionists'. As a consequence, those members reduced their participation in the discussions on the recommendations and abstained from voting. Hence, the 'consensus' achieved by the chairperson was not a true consensus but rather a simple majority. Interestingly, the board members who were not in favor of a recommendation knew that they could object and either force the recommendation to be tabled for lack of 'consensus', or force the issue requiring the preparation of a minority report. They chose not to move based on a sense of frustration at the way decision making was done rather than from revising the recommendations to their liking, or that a minority report would not be given any serious consideration by DOE.

## CONCLUSION

We apply the theory of consensus everyday to many of our activities without a great deal of thought or fanfare, but yet obtain positive results. However, when it is applied to group dynamics, the use of consensus for decision making has to be applied carefully to ensure that members do not feel that they are being pressured to 'go along' with the majority and that all concerns are considered equally. In contrast to 'majority rules' decision making, members can at least feel that they have had a chance to show support or non-support and are given time to articulate their reasons. Either way, the general approach to consensus, particularly for DOE SSABs, is that whatever has been proposed is 'good' and therefore should receive full support from all the members of the group. The result is often a 'grudging' agreement on the topic in question accompanied by the loss of trust among group members, and development of a negative attitude towards the process and the group.

## REFERENCES

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