

Dangers of consensus decision making



At a recent nonprofit board conference, participants were asked how they discuss and decide their issues. The majority of the attendees agreed that they use “informal consensus.”

WHAT IS INFORMAL CONSENSUS?

Here is a description of informal consensus from Andy Robinson’s book, *Great Boards for Small Groups*:

- Someone presents an idea.
- Idea is passed around and pros and cons discussed.
- Idea may be modified.
- If general agreement emerges, test for consensus.
- If anyone disagrees, return to discussion, try to make proposal acceptable to all.

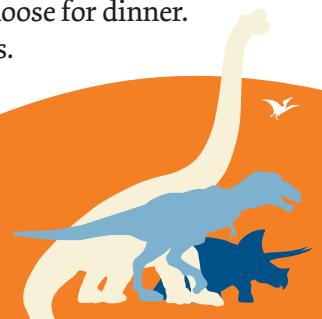
For many groups, this is the ordinary, “go along to get along” mode of discussion. It’s like a conversation between friends. People who want to talk speak up and other people keep quiet. Interrupting is common.

For some topics, this method works reasonably well. Everyone feels comfortable using this approach. It is familiar and harmonious. You don’t have to learn any special rules to make it work. It doesn’t lead to “winners” and “losers.”

CONSENSUS DECISION-MAKING HAS DISADVANTAGES

At the same time, this way of tackling issues has disadvantages. In this situation, people often experience pressure towards conformity. The desire for harmony can make it hard to speak out. People with strong contrary opinions can be seen as troublemakers or agitators. The chair, who takes the lead in formulating the consensus position, has a lot of power. Afterward someone might ask, “What was that decision anyway?” The chair will reply, exercising that power.

We believe that this method works well for minor decisions, like which restaurant to choose for dinner. It has serious pitfalls, though, when more complex issues are at stake in formal settings.



THOUGHTS ON CONSENSUS DECISION-MAKING

Richard Holbrooke, writing about our Afghanistan policy in 2010, gave this description of discussions in the corridors of power:

People sit in a room, they don't air their real differences, a false and sloppy consensus papers over those underlying differences, and they go back to their offices and continue to work at cross purposes.

Jerry Harvey, in his 1974 description of the “Abilene Paradox,” talks about groups collectively arriving at a decision that no one, in particular, is enthusiastic about. And Irving Janis in his book *Groupthink* points out the ways in which groups can settle on one choice while failing to notice its disadvantages or contrary indications.

We all have a natural human wish to be liked by the other members of our group. Most of us don't want to rock the boat when others seem to be satisfied. Yet this wish for “social cohesion” can lead to poor decisions and dangerous consequences if members fail to speak up about their concerns.

In our view, the single most important factor in group decision-making is whether each individual is giving their true, unbiased opinion. In an informal consensus board, this sometimes doesn't happen.

SUGGESTIONS IF YOU USE CONSENSUS DECISION-MAKING

If your board uses informal consensus, we invite you to consider following the Golden Rule for discussion: *no one may speak a second time until everyone who wishes to do so has spoken once*. Putting this rule into place will go a long way towards broadening your discussions and allowing everyone's voice to be heard.

We also encourage you to write things down before voting on them. A designated board member like the secretary could do this or the draft decision could be written on flip chart or whiteboard where everyone can view it. Getting the text of the exact proposal you are considering in writing, before the vote, will make it clear to all what is being decided.

Finally, we suggest that your group give up striving for unanimity. Encourage differing opinions. When there isn't clear agreement, take a split vote, and don't worry about it! Diverse opinions are a sign of the strength of your group.

For decisions more complicated than which restaurant to choose, people may have strongly varying opinions. And that is fine. Your organization deserves to draw upon the full depth of members' life experience and wisdom, which is only possible when your board members can tolerate conflict and disagreement.

Do these reflections spark any ideas about your board? *Share your stories with us!*

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ANOTHER STYLE OF CONSENSUS DECISION-MAKING

Note that there is another type of consensus decision-making that avoids these pitfalls. C.T. Butler has developed a values-based consensus system. It is very effective for groups that are relatively homogenous, and that have the time and energy to invest in learning how to use it. You can read about it and order his book [by clicking on this link](#).

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