

# Consensus Decision Making 2hr sample workshop plan



The activities we suggest should work for most groups but feel free to tweak the plan based on what you know about the participants and your own facilitation style. Also, we have tried to include as much detail as possible about how you might explain activities and ideas. This workshop plan might help you if you have never facilitated a workshop like this one before, but please feel free to tinker with it or do it completely differently. Our briefings *Facilitating Workshops* and *Facilitation Tools for Meetings and Workshops* will explain how we've put this workshop plan together.

This workshop is designed to last 2 hours. These timings are based on 10 participants. (Don't worry if your workshop happens more quickly or slowly – a lot will depend on the group and your own facilitation style).

In the *materials* column we've listed the resources you'll need to have to hand. Remember to sort these out before your workshop!

The **aims** of the workshop are:

- For participants to get a shared understanding of what consensus decision making is and the ideas behind it.
- To introduce or re-familiarise participants with a model of the consensus process.
- To practise using this process to reach consensus in a meeting.

Time	Activity	Materials
0.00 15 mins	<p><b>Introductions</b></p> <p><b>Aim</b></p> <p>To share information about the content of the workshop and other practicalities.</p> <p>To check this against participants' expectations so they can decide if the workshop is right for them and/or you can make adaptations if you feel able.</p> <p>To help people get to know each other a little and feel relaxed so they can get more out of the workshop.</p> <p><b>Facilitation note:</b> People often don't arrive on time for the start of a workshop. If people are also able to leave late then starting a little late may not be a problem, but if you want to run to time, you could advertise a slightly earlier start time for people to get together, drink tea etc., and be very clear in your publicity when the actual workshop will start.</p> <p><b>The activities</b></p> <p><b>Go round.</b> Ask participants: In a couple of sentences tell us your name, your experience of consensus, if any, and what you hope to get out of this workshop. Try to keep it short so we get a chance to hear everyone.</p> <p>Start by introducing yourself to model how short contributions can be.</p> <p><b>Agenda check:</b> Briefly explain the agenda and how it will cover the things people have mentioned. If someone has mentioned something you haven't planned to cover, acknowledge it and be clear about what you can and can't</p>	<p>Agenda</p> <p>Proposed Group agreement.</p> <p>Parking space</p> <p>Handouts</p>

Time	Activity	Materials
	<p>offer them (e.g. a chat at the end, another workshop at another time, a tweak to your existing plan etc.)</p> <p><b>Housekeeping:</b> Make sure you (or whoever is responsible for the venue) tells everyone what they need to know about toilets, fire exits, tea and coffee facilities etc.</p> <p><b>Parking space:</b> You could set up a parking space (a blank flipchart or whiteboard put within reach of everyone – eg on a handy wall) where any participant can note down any questions that come up which are not on topic. Be clear about how these will be dealt with, e.g. at the end of the workshop, in another workshop, by the group at another time.</p> <p><b>Handouts:</b> Written handouts can reinforce people’s memory of the things you cover in the workshop. If you have written or printed off handouts for people then tell them at the start to they don't waste their time making notes if they don't want to. Lots of materials are available to be downloaded for free at <a href="http://www.seedsforchange.org.uk/resources">www.seedsforchange.org.uk/resources</a></p>	
10 mins	<p><b>Energiser: the chair game</b></p> <p><b>Aim</b></p> <p>To help people relax and concentrate by playing a physical game.</p> <p>To provide an example of how groups can co-operate for win-win solutions which you can refer back to when you are explaining consensus.</p> <p><b>The activity</b></p> <p>Props: 3 chairs or cushions in the middle of the floor, placed in a line.</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Explain that this is a physical energiser. Ask the group to be careful of each other, and make it clear that anyone who wants to can play a useful role as an observer. Remember to ask for their thoughts when the group debriefs at the end.</li> <li>2. Divide the group into three, avoiding competitive language like teams. Explain each group will be briefed separately and send them into different parts of the space so they can't overhear each other easily.</li> <li>3. Give each group their instructions quietly. When you say "Go!" one group must sit on the chairs/cushions and encourage the others to do the same, one group must rearrange them into a circle, and the other must move them to next to the door/window/tree.</li> <li>4. Explain you will finish the exercise by saying "Stop!". Start them off and allow it to run until they have got as much out of it as they can, e.g. they are fighting over the chairs and look like they could hurt each other(!), they have started to negotiate and look like they are reaching a solution, you are running out of time etc.</li> </ol> <p><b>Feedback</b></p> <p>Bring the group back together for a debrief. This is the most important part of the exercise: if necessary it allows the group to work out a solution everyone is happy with (a circle of chairs, with people sitting on them, next to the door). It also allows them to draw parallels with real decision making in groups: if we all communicate openly about what we want and don't assume our needs are in competition with other people's we can sometimes</p>	

Time	Activity	Materials
	<p>find solutions that everyone is happy with.</p> <p>Start with open questions, e.g. <i>What happened there?</i> If necessary help the group with narrower questions like: <i>What was each group's instructions? Could you have found any different solutions? What parallels can we draw between this and group decision making in general?</i></p> <p><b>Facilitation note:</b> Be wary of starting a large open discussion at this stage – it could swallow a lot of time! Take a few contributions, add a summary of your own if you think it is helpful, and explain you want to move on to cover the rest of the agenda.</p>	
0.25 10 mins	<p><b>What is consensus decision making?</b></p> <p><b>Aim</b> To gain a shared understanding of what consensus decision making is.</p> <p><b>The activity</b> Ask the group: <i>What do you understand consensus decision making to be?</i> Explain they can shout out their ideas and you will write them on a flipchart/whiteboard. If they get stuck you could help them by asking them more specific questions, e.g.: <i>How is it different from voting? What is a consensus group aiming for?</i></p> <p><b>Facilitation note:</b> You might want to summarise people's points so there is space to write everything down, and to check you've understood them right. If you do this then make sure you check with them that your summary represents what they were trying to say.</p> <p>Continue until people's points start to dry up, or you run out of time. Offer a summary of the points people have made and add in any extra details if necessary. You might want your summary to cover the following points:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Consensus decision making is a way of making decisions that aims to find solutions that everyone can support, or they can at least live with.</li> <li>• It is based on the idea that everyone in the group is equally important, and if they are affected by a decision they have a right to be equally involved in making it.</li> <li>• Instead of voting and going for the decision a majority is happy with, everyone has the right to block or veto a decision they absolutely cannot live with.</li> </ul> <p>Be aware that people often think that consensus is a hand-signal (where people wave their hands to show agreement). It can help to address this directly: <i>People often associate consensus decision making with hand-wiggling. This is a tool used as a short cut in some groups which also use consensus, but it isn't the same thing. Consensus is...</i></p> <p><b>Facilitation note:</b> When you offer your summary refer to what is on the paper, e.g. <i>as Cath said, it is about looking for win-win solutions.</i> If someone says something you think is not quite right then say so, (tactfully!), e.g. <i>someone said it is about everybody agreeing on a solution. This is exactly what a consensus group is aiming for, but sometimes some people will accept a solution that they aren't totally happy with in order to let the group go ahead.</i></p> <p>See the Seeds for Change briefing <i>Consensus Decision Making</i> for a more</p>	<p>Blank flip paper and pens</p> <p>Definition written up on flip</p>

Time	Activity	Materials
	detailed explanation of what consensus is.	
0.35 20 mins	<p><b>Why Consensus?</b></p> <p><b>Aims</b> To get a shared understanding of the principles behind consensus decision making, and practical benefits it can have.</p> <p><b>Facilitation note:</b> Decide whether you want this to also be a space for people to share negative views on consensus. If you decide it would be unhelpful then explain why, and suggest where people might get a chance to talk about these things (for example, at the end of the workshop).</p> <p><b>The activity</b> Organise participants into groups of 3-4 to discuss the following questions. Before they start tell them:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• They will have ten minutes for the exercise and then you will check to see if they are ready to finish.</li> <li>• They will be asked to feedback a few key points at the end.</li> </ul> <p>Questions Why might you use consensus decision making in a group? Think about:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• How it fits with your personal politics and ethics.</li> <li>• How it fits with what the group is trying to achieve.</li> <li>• Any practical benefits it might have.</li> </ul> <p><b>Feedback</b> Give the groups 2 minutes at the end of their discussions to choose the key points they want to feed back to the rest of the group. Explain that you have only allowed ten minutes for this, and so ask them to be concise. Take one point from each group, then ask for any extra points that haven't been made yet. You might want to add in some points of your own, for example:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Consensus decision-making is a way of finding a balance between the needs of the individual to have control over what they sign up to, and the needs of the group to act together in order to get things done.</li> <li>• The right to <i>veto</i> a decision means that minorities cannot just be ignored, but creative solutions will have to be found to deal with their concerns.</li> <li>• It has the potential to make better decisions that the group is more committed to: a wider range of perspectives are considered, and everyone has a greed to the final decision so should be more committed to making it happen.</li> <li>• It is about co-operation between equals. It encourages everyone to engage and participate.</li> </ul>	Questions written up on flip paper.
0.55 10 mins	<p><b>A Process for reaching consensus</b></p> <p><b>Aims</b> To introduce a structured process for reaching consensus, and the reasons</p>	Flip chart or other visuals showing 6

Time	Activity	Materials
	<p>behind each step.</p> <p><b>Facilitation note:</b> This section involves the facilitator presenting information to participants. To help everyone concentrate and remember, limit what you are saying to a few key points, and back it up with visuals and examples. For example, you might write each step of the 6 step process on a separate piece of paper to make a flow chart on the floor, or write it up on one flip chart.</p> <p><b>Presentation</b></p> <p>Explain the six step consensus flow chart and also the 'lozenge' diagram to participants. (See the Seeds for Change briefing on <i>Consensus Decision Making</i> for more detail). Below are some notes on what you might choose to say.</p> <p>There are different consensus models, but they all share the same basic stages.</p> <p>Introduce the 6 stages of the consensus decision making flow chart. Explain that not every group follows all these stages formally and in order, but it provides a useful structure to make sure decisions are being made well. Explain the purpose of each stage, and the meaning of the different ways of agreeing and disagreeing.</p> <p>For example use the Consensus Flowchart in the Appendix</p>	<p>step model, ways of agreeing and disagreeing (blocks, stand asides etc.)</p> <p>Flow chart Lozenge diagram</p> <p>Both available in the appendix, on the Seeds for Change web site and in our Consensus briefing.</p>
<p>1.05 15 mins</p>	<p><b>Practising the consensus process</b></p> <p><b>Aim</b></p> <p>Participants gain familiarity and understanding of the consensus process you have introduced.</p> <p><b>Facilitation note:</b> If the group is familiar with this process already you might want to skip this activity. The points under the heading <i>Presentation</i> below can be fed into the debrief of the <i>Practising working towards consensus</i> section.</p> <p><b>The activity</b></p> <p>Give the group a scenario, e.g. 'your group gets given £1000 to spend in the next 3 months'. Ask <i>What might be happening in each stage of the consensus process in this discussion?</i></p> <p>The group shouts out ideas for each one, if necessary feed in your own thoughts. Possible answers:</p> <p><b>Step 1:</b> Ask questions, e.g. who is the money from, are there any conditions, why the time limit?</p> <p><b>Step 2:</b> People say what their priorities are, e.g. outreach, resources. People make concrete suggestions 'Let's buy trees', 'Let's have a massive party'.</p> <p><b>Step 3:</b> Find the common ground and look for ways forward, e.g. we all think team-building is an important priority, but for some people that means bringing in new people and for others it means bolstering the existing team. Can we find something which achieves both?</p> <p><b>Step 4:</b> Write down the proposal, do a go round to see what people think of it, find ways to change it.</p> <p><b>Step 5:</b> Write the proposal down again if it has changed. The facilitator</p>	

Time	Activity	Materials
	<p>asks: <i>any blocks? any stand asides? any reservations? do we have consensus?</i></p> <p><b>Step 6:</b> Work out what needs doing to make it happen, make sure you know who will do what, by when, what support they need and how the group as a whole will check it has been done.</p> <p><b>Presentation</b></p> <p>Wrap up the discussion by emphasising a few key points, clarifying anything on which there is confusion. In particular you might want to mention:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The specific use of the word 'proposal' in the consensus context - it is more than an idea or a suggestion. It carries a lot of weight because it implies you have listened to the ideas of the rest of the group and think it could be a way forward that might work for everyone. Therefore it can be better to avoid the word proposal until you are confident the group has explored the issue fully and you are offering something which takes this into account.</li> <li>• It is important that everyone understands the significance of the different options at the test for consensus stage, in particular the block. Suggest that a group using consensus should discuss whether they think the block should only be used against a proposal that goes against the aims of the group as a whole, or whether someone can block for personal reasons. This can depend on the context: 'I feel so strongly I would leave the group if this went ahead' has very different personal consequences if the group is a housing co-op and therefore your home, compared to a temporary campaign group.</li> <li>• People are often resistant to making their meetings too formal, but even in a small meeting the steps above can be helpful for clear communication. For example, if you don't write down the proposal then people can go away with very different ideas of what has been agreed!</li> <li>• Exploring an issue fully can take time. People often want to approach decision making by looking for solutions to our problems straight-away, but sometimes we need a fuller discussion first to reach a good decision. The consensus lozenge diagram (<i>Consensus Decision Making</i>, page 5) illustrates this point. It shows how in the beginning of a discussion we can open things up, and explore our different opinions, ideas and needs. This feels like it is taking us further away from agreement, but it can provide the material to bring things back together in a way that takes different perspectives into account. This saves the time it would have taken to revisit hasty decisions.</li> </ul>	
<p>1.20 35 mins</p>	<p><b>Practise working towards consensus</b></p> <p><b>Aims</b></p> <p>Participants gain first hand experience of working towards consensus using the process above. They reflect on this experience, and how the consensus process above did or didn't help them.</p> <p><b>The activity</b></p> <p>In groups of 4-8 participants roleplay coming to a decision on imaginary scenarios. Make sure they know:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• They can choose to appoint a facilitator if they want, but should all</li> </ul>	<p>Stages of consensus displayed</p> <p>Scenarios written down on flips.</p>

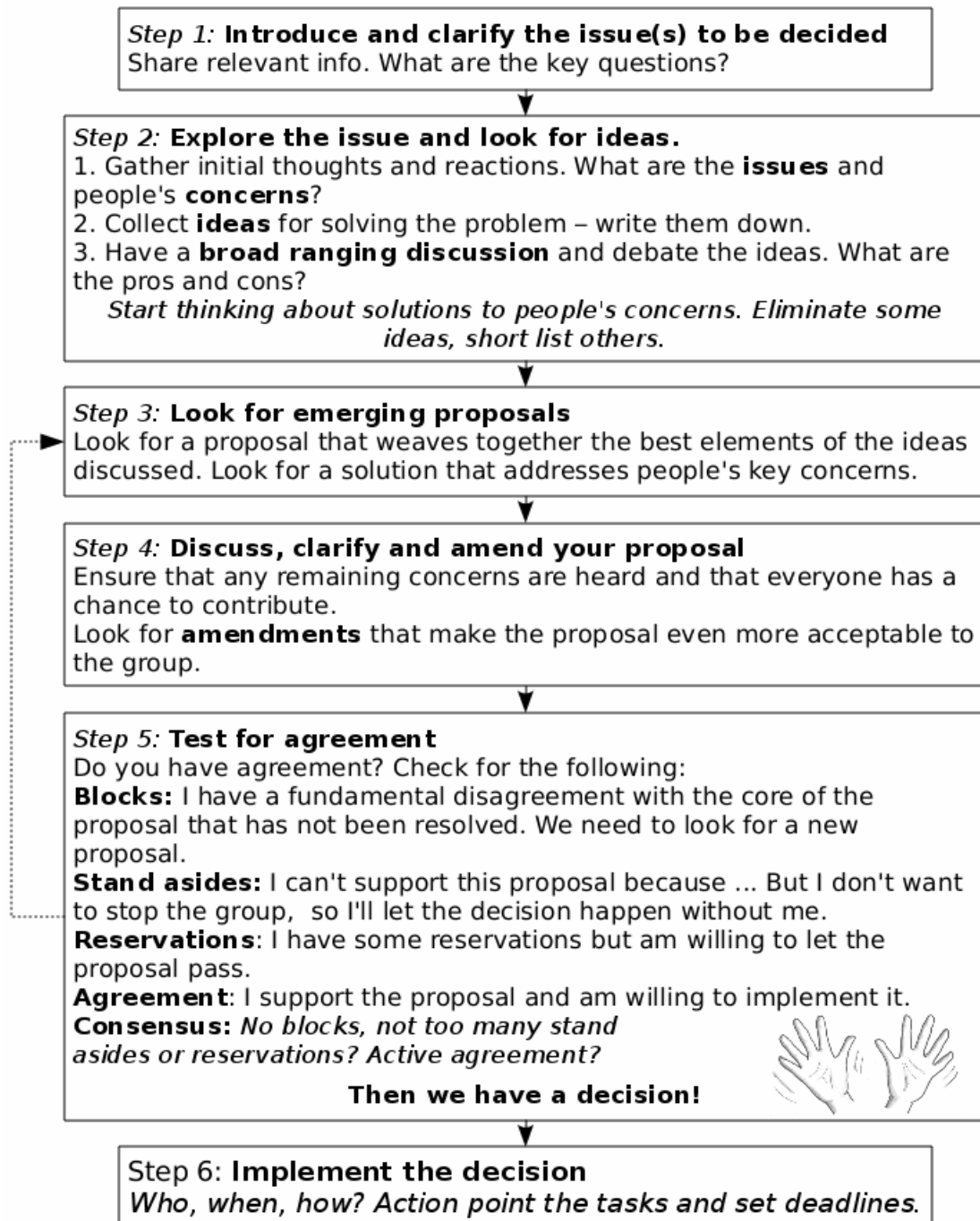
Time	Activity	Materials
	<p>take responsibility for following the consensus process.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• They have 20 min in total, and they can choose to run one scenario for a long time, or try out a few.</li> <li>• They should debrief the experience in their groups after each scenario. Offer sample debrief questions on flip chart or printed out, e.g.: <i>How did that feel? Did you follow the process? Anything you would do differently another time?</i></li> <li>• This exercise works best if people are prepared to 'play' a little. Encourage them to invent details of the scenario to keep the conversations flowing, to play devil's advocate if reaching agreement is feeling too easy, but not to give the facilitator too hard a time!</li> </ul> <p>Create scenarios that are relevant to the group or use these examples. Make sure the scenario you use does not involve a 'live' conflict in the group as this could distract from the learning. If you are writing your own scenarios, be sure to phrase them in a way that doesn't close down the discussion preemptively. For example, if you say <i>Should we have the door open or closed?</i> people only have two options to choose between and may struggle to reach agreement. If you say <i>What shall we do about access to the building?</i> people are able to suggest locking the door, taking it off its hinges altogether, using a back entrance etc.</p> <p><b>Example scenarios</b></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. What should the group's policy be on people attending the meetings under the influence of alcohol and other drugs?</li> <li>2. You organise a popular local band to play at a fundraiser. At the last minute you get a phone call from the venue saying that the last time that band played one of the band members was excluded from the after party for making sexist comments to the bar staff.</li> </ol> <p><b>Feedback</b></p> <p>Bring the group back together to debrief all together. Example questions:  <i>How did that feel? What did you observe happening? How was it different from other (consensus) meetings you have been in in the past? Anything you can learn from this?</i></p>	
1.55 5 mins	<p><b>Evaluation</b></p> <p><b>Aim</b></p> <p>To help your learning as a facilitator. To give the participants chance to express their thoughts and feelings about how the workshop went.</p> <p><b>Facilitation note:</b> There are lots of different possible ways of getting feedback, from a form to an informal chat. The key is to let the participants know that the most useful thing for you is specific details about what did and didn't work for them and why: general comments like "It was great!" might help your confidence but don't teach you much else.</p> <p><b>The activity</b></p> <p>This is a simple option that should get you useful feedback.</p> <p>Do a go-round, where everyone has a chance to speak in turn without interruption. Ask the group to tell you:</p>	

Time	Activity	Materials
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• One thing which worked well for them and why.</li> <li>• One thing which didn't work so well for them and why.</li> <li>• Something new which they learnt.</li> </ul> <p>Write these up on a flipchart as they talk.</p> <p><b>Facilitation note:</b> a go-round like this can make people feel put on the spot. Make sure people know they can pass if they want to, or let people contribute in a random order, but making sure everyone can speak once before anyone gets a second turn. You might do this for all three questions at once, or do each one in turn.</p>	



# Appendix materials

## Consensus Flow Chart



## Consensus Lozenge

