

# Consensus in Large Groups



Consensus decision making is widely used in grassroots groups across the globe, but people often assume it's a process that can only work with a small group of people. This briefing gives you some tools you can use to make consensus work with larger groups.

For more information about what consensus is and how it works, see our *Consensus Decision-Making* briefing. You may also find it useful to read our briefings on *Facilitation* and *Organising Successful Meetings*.

## Conditions for using consensus

Before trying to use consensus in any group, you need to make sure that certain conditions are met. These are particularly important in a large group meeting or **spokes council** (see 'Tools for working in large groups'):

**Common Goal:** Everyone present at the meeting needs to have some common ground – whether it's the desire to take action at a specific event, or a shared ethos. Obviously more people at a meeting means more opinions. So finding the common goal and bringing the group back to it when differences arise can keep a meeting focused and united.

**Commitment to consensus building:** Consensus requires commitment, patience, tolerance and a willingness to put the group first. It would be easy to call for a vote at the first sign of difficulty, and in a large group there will be disagreement and conflict. But in the consensus model, disagreement can be used as a tool for helping to build a stronger final decision!

**Sufficient time:** All decision making techniques need enough time if the quality of decision is going to be good. Consensus is no different – it needs enough time both for making decisions and for learning to work by consensus. In international groups you might also need to allow time for translation. In spokes councils you need to allow time for affinity groups to consult and come to their own consensus.

**Clear Process:** It's essential that the whole group has a shared understanding of the process that the meeting is using – remember that there are variations of the consensus process, so even if people have a lot of experience of using consensus they may use it differently to you! There may be a **group agreement** or **ground rules** in use that need explaining (see 'Facilitating consensus in large groups'). Sticking up a large piece of paper with a flowchart of the consensus process will help people to remember which stage of the process you are at. It might also be worth explaining the consensus model at the beginning of the meeting, especially if there are new people in the group.

**Good facilitation and active participation:** Appointing one or more facilitators can help your large group meeting run more smoothly. The facilitators are there to ensure that the group works harmoniously, creatively and democratically. They're also there to make sure the task of the meeting gets done - that decisions are made and implemented. To make that possible they need active support from everyone present!

## Tools for working in large groups

**Small group to large group consensus** begins with the whole group discussing the issue, highlighting problems and then drawing up a list of possible proposals. Then people split into small groups and discuss the proposals (each group exploring all the proposals, or each group taking away just one proposal and examining it in more depth). The small groups return to the main forum and report back, highlighting possible obstacles to each proposal. If full group discussion cannot resolve the obstacles, the small groups go away to try and find ways of solving the problem. They report back, and this process continues until the obstacles are overcome, and a decision is made. This tool can easily be combined with a spokes council (see below).

**The Spokes council** is one of the most common tools for making consensus decisions in large groups. In a spokes council, smaller groups come together to make shared decisions. Each group is represented by their 'spoke' – they communicate to the meeting through him or her, allowing hundreds of people to be represented by fewer voices. What the spoke is empowered to do is up to their affinity group. Spokes may need to consult with their group before discussing or agreeing on certain subjects.

Here is an outline process for a spokes council that uses the small to large group technique above: (Note: step 1 and 2 can also take place in advance within the individual small groups)

1. Whole group – Introduce the issue and give all the necessary information
2. Explain both the consensus and the spokes council process
3. Form into small groups – these could be a random selection of people at the meeting, existing affinity groups, or groups based on where people live or based on a shared language.
4. The small groups discuss the issue, gather ideas and discuss pros and cons coming up with one or more proposals.
5. Each small group selects a spoke – a person from their group that will represent the group's view at the spokes council. Small groups decide whether the spoke is a messenger for the group – e.g. relays information between the small group and the spokes council - or whether the spoke can make decisions on the group's behalf at the spokes council.
6. Spokes from all groups come together in the spokes council. They in turn present the view of their group. The spokes then have a discussion to try and incorporate the various proposals into one workable idea. During this process the spokes may need to call time out to refer with their groups for clarification or to see whether a modified proposal would be acceptable to them. It is important for the spoke to speak on the behalf of the group and not to present their own personal point of view.
7. Once the spokes council has come up with one or more possible proposals the spokes meet with their groups and check for agreement and objections. Groups can also suggest further modifications of the proposals.
8. Spokes meet back at the spokes council and check whether the groups agree. If not all groups agree, the discussion continues.

To make the spokes council more accountable and reduce the need for repeating information, the

spokes council can take place in the fish bowl format (see below), with the groups sitting in an outer circle around the spokes. Each group can sit directly behind their spoke, which makes it easier for the spoke to quickly check back with their group.

**Fish bowl:** A few people sit in an inner circle and discuss the subject at hand. They are observed by the rest of the group, who form a circle around them. Only the people in the fish bowl are allowed to speak. The make up of the inner circle can vary but should probably be a representative sample of the opinions in the group. The fish bowl regulates the number of people with access to the discussion, and allows everyone else to observe easily. Once the fish bowl arrives at a proposal, this is then put to the whole group for agreement.

There are several variations to a fish bowl. In one those in the middle can only participate in the discussion for a limited amount of time, or for the duration of one discussion item. In another new people can join the inner group by the invitation of that group and must leave again when the original group ask them to. Another variation has one more chair in the inner circle than there are people. Anyone can go and sit in the empty seat, but when they do so someone else must leave the circle so that one chair remains empty at all times. Spokes council meetings are often held in a fish bowl format.

**2, 4, 8 consensus** is an excellent tool for prioritising in large groups. This exercise will take time, but will help a group reach a decision that everyone can live with! It's usually best to impose tight time limits at every stage of this discussion!

- ◆ Draw up a list of proposals in the whole group.
- ◆ Form pairs. Each pair discusses the list of possible proposals and is asked to agree their top 3 priorities (it could be any number, but for this example we'll use 3).
- ◆ Each pair then comes together with another, to form a group of 4. The 2 pairs compare their lists of top 3 priorities and, after discussion, agree on a joint top 3.
- ◆ Each group of 4 comes together with another to form a group of 8. Again, each group takes its 2 lists of priorities and reduces it to one list of 3.
- ◆ Repeat until the whole group has come back together and has a shared list of just 3 priorities.

**The double go-round** allows everyone to contribute to the discussion and to hear everyone else's opinion. The meeting listens to everyone express their opinion in turn. Each person has the same amount of time to speak. Unlike a normal go-round, the exercise doesn't finish once everyone has spoken. Instead the go-round continues allowing people to respond to what they have heard. The meeting keeps going round until consensus is reached. This tool is great for making sure everyone's voice is heard. It does however take time, that you need to plan for. For example if you have thirty people and allow everyone to speak for 2 minutes each you need one hour per round.

## Facilitating consensus in large groups

As mentioned above good facilitation is essential for working in large group. Here are some simple tools for making large meetings more participatory and effective.

**The meeting venue:** Wherever you meet it's important that the space, and the way you use the space doesn't isolate or alienate anybody. Is everyone able to hear and see clearly? Some rooms have very bad acoustics that require people to shout to be heard. Others have fixed seating or columns that restrict people's view and their ability to participate. Is the venue accessible to everyone? Is it reasonable to ask everyone to stand for long meetings, or sit on the floor? Can you open windows for fresh air? What's the lighting like?

**Translation:** For many international actions and gatherings you'll need to be aware of language barriers. Don't assume everyone can understand. You might just need to ask people to speak more slowly, or you might need translation into one or more languages.

**Facilitation roles:** One facilitator is rarely enough for a long meeting with a large group. Form a facilitation team to cover the following roles:

- ◆ **Facilitator** – helps the group decide on and keep to the structure and process of the meeting. This means running through the agenda point by point, keeping the focus of the discussion on one item at a time, regulating the flow of the discussion and making sure everyone participates. The facilitator also clarifies and summarises points and tests for consensus.
- ◆ **Co-facilitator** – someone to step in and facilitate if the facilitator is flagging, or feels a need to express their opinion on an issue.
- ◆ **Doorkeeper** – meets and greets people on the way into the meeting. The doorkeeper can check that everyone knows what the meeting is for and hand out any documents such as minutes from the last meeting. The role is especially important for making new people feel welcome, and bringing latecomers up to speed without having to interrupt the whole meeting. In a consensus meeting, the doorkeeper can explain the consensus model to newcomers to ensure a shared understanding of the process.
- ◆ **Note taker** – notes down the proposals and the key decisions. They also draw attention to incomplete decisions -for example who is going to contact so and so and when?
- ◆ **Vibeswatcher**– watches the vibe of the meeting to note rising tension, lack of focus, flagging energy etc. The vibeswatcher can then suggest that the group takes appropriate action, like taking a break.
- ◆ **Stacker** – keeps a list of who is wanting to speak in the meeting and ensures they're called to speak in turn (see **hand signals**).
- ◆ **Timekeeper** – makes sure each agenda item gets enough time for discussion, and that the meeting finishes at the agreed time.

**Breaks:** Taking a break can revitalise a meeting, reduce tension, and give people time to reflect on proposals and decisions. Plan in a 15 minute break at least every 2 hours and take spontaneous breaks if the meeting gets too heated or attention is flagging.

**Group agreements & ground rules:** Agree at the beginning of the meeting on how the meeting will be run. This can prevent a lot of problems from occurring in the first place. It also makes it easier for the facilitators to challenge disruptive behaviour later on, as they can refer back to “what we all agreed”. Possible ground rules might include using consensus; using agreed hand signals; not interrupting each other; active participation; challenging oppressive behaviour; respecting opinions; sticking to agreed time limits and switching off mobile phones. Draw up group agreements at the beginning of the meeting.

**Clear agenda:** Having an agreed meeting agenda can help make a meeting run more smoothly. It can be worth taking time to sort out the agenda at the start, being realistic about what can be achieved in the time you've got, and what needs to be dealt with at a later meeting. Setting time limits on each agenda item can help the meeting end on time. Make sure that everyone has an up to date copy of the agenda or write it up on a flip chart for everyone to see. This helps to keep the discussion on topic.

**Hand signals:** are another simple technique that can make meetings run more smoothly and help the facilitator spot emerging agreements and common ground. There are many hand signals in use – we recommend the following ones:

- ◆ Raise a hand or forefinger when you wish to contribute to the discussion.
- ◆ If your point is directly relevant, raise both forefingers. This allows you to jump to the head of the queue, in front of all those people raising just one finger. This is open to abuse and requires strict facilitation.
- ◆ ‘Silent applause’ – when you hear an opinion with which you agree you can simply wave a hand with your fingers pointing upwards. You can express disagreement by waving your hand with fingers pointing down. This saves the group a lot of time with people chipping in to say “I’d just like to add that I agree with...”.
- ◆ A block or veto is expressed by a raised fist.

**Consensus training:** Running pre-meeting 'introduction to consensus' sessions can make meetings more inclusive for everyone, and avoid conflict that arises from a misunderstanding of the process.

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