

**Seeds for
Change
Short guide**



Quick consensus decision making

**A guide to using consensus in fast moving situations,
including actions and protests**

Quick consensus decisions

Dynamic situations such as actions and protests often involve making group decisions quickly. You may only have a few minutes to decide what to do. This guide explores how you can reach consensus quickly in these situations, by preparing together in advance.

Quick consensus ensures that everyone actively agrees to the decisions taken and bears equal responsibility for the consequences. It is worth trying out for two reasons. Firstly, decisions taken on actions can have high stakes, for example because there is a risk of arrest or physical injury. Secondly, it is usually more effective to make decisions collectively on an action – for example deciding to leave all together instead of dribbling away in ones and twos. The aim is to make strong collective decisions where everyone has the power of consent in decisions that impact them.



Preparing beforehand

Ordinarily, consensus decision making is based on having a lot of discussion and exploration to understand everyone's position before coming up with solutions. It is not possible to do this when you have to make a quick decision at an action. Instead, a group that is going to an action together can take the time beforehand to explore each others' needs and likely reactions in the situations you might meet.

Potential scenarios

Start by thinking up the likely scenarios you might find yourselves in, e.g. needing to decide quickly whether to stay in a demo where the police are threatening you with arrest. Discuss these scenarios in your group and make sure you hear from each person about their feelings and preferred responses.

Share any factors about your individual circumstances that might affect the risks involved in the action for you. For example: "I'm often targeted by the police at demonstrations"; "I need to be home in time to pick my kids up from school"; "Arrest could have serious consequences for me because my migration status isn't secure."

Also share information about your likely emotional or physical responses in situations of stress. For example, you're asthmatic and may react particularly badly to tear gas; you get anxious when plans change. Ask each other questions like: what situations do you find stressful? Is there anything that can help you if you're anxious?

Try this

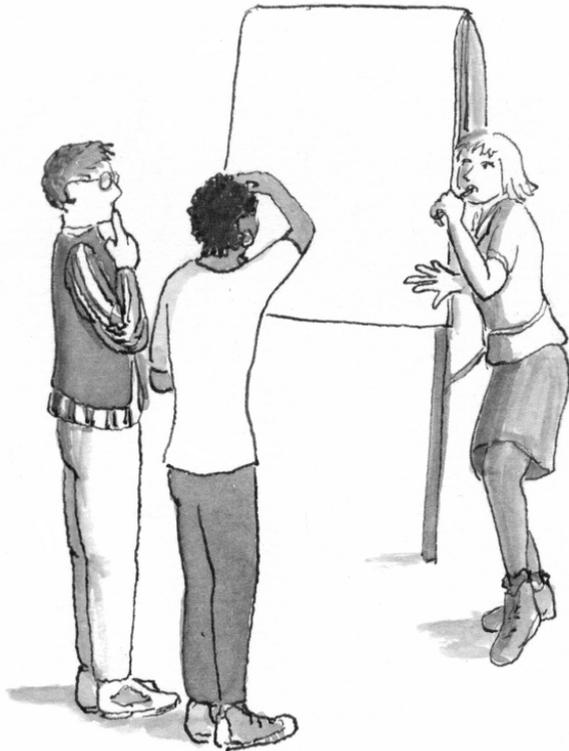


Rather than simply talking about what you would do in different situations, try using imaginary scenarios to practise making decisions at speed. As well as being a more concrete way to think about what you would do in different situations, this will also help you practise the process.

Practical preparation

Appoint a facilitator: It is best to do this in advance, rather than losing precious seconds in the heat of the moment.

Back-up plans: If you think you may be in a situation where quick consensus may not work, for example you won't have any time at all to make a decision, or you haven't been able to do the right preparation then your group should think (in advance!) about other ways of making decisions, whether that's following a particular person's lead or a pre-arranged general plan.



A process for quick consensus

The following approach assumes you have only a minimal amount of time to make a decision. If you have a bit more time then you may wish to include some discussion, but the facilitator will have to decide at the time.

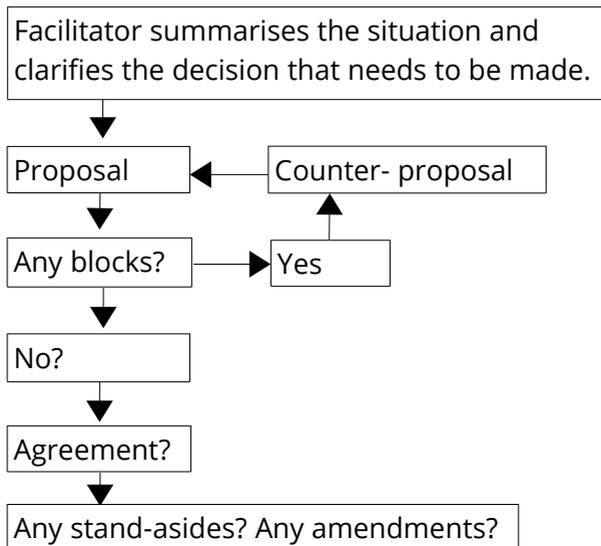
The facilitator **summarises** the situation, and clarifies the decision that needs to be made.

Someone makes just **one proposal** based on the information they have about the different people in the group, and what they wanted to do in comparable situations. If the group is considering more than one proposal at a time, the discussion can be confusing and take too long.

Once everyone has understood the current proposal, check first whether anyone is **blocking** it. If it is blocked, then move onto another proposal immediately, rather than spending time on discussing the block.

If there is time, check for **stand-asides**. You may amend the proposal to help everyone to feel comfortable with it.

The facilitator's role is then to move the discussion on to **implementing** the decision.



Blocks and stand-asides in quick consensus

As with the usual consensus processes, there is a difference between blocks and stand-asides.

A stand-aside means “I won’t do this but I’m OK if the rest of the group does it”. This allows the proposal to go ahead in the group’s name, but those that choose to stand aside take no part in that action.

A block is a fundamental objection and means a proposal can’t go ahead. Blocks are more likely to happen in quick consensus because the group hasn’t had time to explore where people are on the decision.

Everyone has the right to block. It means: “I don’t want the group to do this”. In quick consensus people normally block for 2 reasons:

- a proposal will split the group, often because of ethical objections, or because it might endanger someone’s safety; or
- the group is failing to make a decision, and the discussion is taking time. Blocking one proposal makes space for another one, which may work for more people.

Tips for participating in quick decision making

Active agreement: consciously participating in the decision, and showing agreement (e.g. by using hand-signals) – if there isn’t active agreement, you need to ask “is there really any energy for this idea?”

One voice at a time: avoids discussion descending into chaos.

Hand-signals: there are a number of hand gestures that can speed up the process of decision making. For them to be effective, everyone in the group must be fluent with them, so agree them in advance! You want to minimise the number of hand-signals you use and pare it down to essentials, e.g.:

- Raise a finger: “I’d like to speak.”
- Hands waving with fingers upwards: “I agree.”
- Fist: “I block this proposal.”

Example quick consensus process

Step 1: Appoint a facilitator in advance.

Step 2: The facilitator briefly states the situation to make sure everyone is clear:

"We've been given 2 minutes to move off the road or we'll all be arrested."

Step 3: The facilitator asks for proposals.

In some cases there may be time for discussion, but in others there won't be. It's up to the facilitator to assess the time and act appropriately.

Step 4: Someone makes a proposal:

"Yeah, I propose we link arms and sit down."

In some cases you might have time to make amendments to the proposal.

Step 5: Facilitator restates the proposal, for clarity, and then tests for consensus:

"OK, it's proposed that we sit in the road and link arms. Any blocks?"

"No..."

"Any stand-asides?"

"Yeah, I'll lose my job – I want to leave."

"OK, anybody willing to go with Pawel?"

"Yes, I will."

"OK, we're agreed."

Step 6: Make sure everyone knows who is doing what – and then get on and do it!

Quick Consensus Decision Making

In dynamic situations such as actions and protests people may only have (at most) a few minutes to decide what to do. There are short cuts to reaching consensus quickly in such situations, but it takes preparation and practice to do it well.

In this guide you'll find lots of tips and a model for quick consensus decision making.

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