

Consensus building is a decision-making process that is vital to any project, planning effort or other process requiring a group decision. Consensus building does not mean everyone agrees that a decision is optimal. It means a decision is reached that everyone can live with; in other words, the decision addresses stakeholders' most important

PE TIP SHEET NO. 16:

Consensus Building

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Consensus building is a process involving compromise. During a particularly heated negotiation while trying to reach consensus on some dynamic issues, someone once told me that the word compromise is defined as the point at which all parties to an agreement or plan are equally exasperated.

Well, I guess that's one way to look at it. I believe a better way to think about reaching consensus is how the European Union defines the process. Consensus is *general agreement, characterized by the absence of sustained opposition to substantial issues by any important part of the concerned interests and by a process that involves seeking to take into account the views of all parties concerned and to reconcile any conflicting arguments.*

In most cases, consensus building can be used anytime depending upon the issues and goals surrounding the deliberation. This process will result in a decision that everyone can live with. With the assistance of an unbiased mediator or facilitator, participants can raise issues, seek to understand each other's views, and then cooperatively, often through compromise, develop an agreed upon resolution.

Consensus building involves a longer timeframe than most other forms of decision-making. Difficult decisions on significant issues require patience, time and participation. It may be necessary to break down big decisions into "mini-agreements" to help build group trust and lay the foundation for major decisions that can be supported and implemented.

How It's Done

Pre-Meeting Legwork

Before beginning the process, do some research to identify stakeholders and/or to convince different interest groups to participate. Take into account the history these groups may have with each other. They may need compelling reasons and assurances as to the validity of the process and what will happen with the outcomes.

Meet with key stakeholders one-on-one to make clear the scope and goals of the consensus building process, the groups' level of decision-making authority, and what they can realistically hope to accomplish. Participants should have a say in the agenda, selecting their representatives, defining the issues, and developing appropriate ground rules. This is one way to build trust into a truly collaborative

process, which is critical to a successful outcome. Take this step of meeting separately with key stakeholders even if the meeting is going to be open to the public at large.

Assign a Facilitator

A highly skilled facilitator who is viewed by all interests as fair and competent will greatly improve the chance for success. The facilitator can maintain group momentum and keep discussions on track by guiding for compromise and common ground in conflicting opinions. All parties should view this person as someone who has no axe to grind.

Set Up the First Meeting

This event can be any size. It can be a large, well-advertised public workshop, a small meeting of a committee or task force, or smaller gathering of key stakeholders. What is most important is that the group represents all of the diverse stakeholder interests.

This first meeting should codify the ground rules and establish attainable objectives. In some cases, there may be a need for several meetings depending upon the scope of the recognized objectives.

The meeting place should be in a "safe" neutral space and held at a convenient time and date that does not conflict most schedules, which means not during a workday or on school or religious holidays. Depending upon the size of the event, invite participants by phoning, mailing invitations, and/or placing notices in newspapers and newsletters.

Let the Process Begin

Follow the agreed upon agenda and post the meeting goals for all to see. These should be referred back to if participants get off track.

The key to reaching a successful consensus is for everyone to have an opportunity to speak and be heard. Be sure to record statements verbatim. Capture thoughts on flip charts, whiteboards or overhead projectors so that everyone can see them and be able to them as the meeting continues.

Follow Up

After the meeting, mail meeting notes. This may include a summary of what happened, the actual quotes of participants, any agreed upon decisions, and any requested information and data that was referred to or is in preparation for the next meeting. If there will be additional meetings, give a large, clear reminder of the date, time, place and goals for subsequent meetings.

When to Use Consensus Building

Use consensus building when:

- ◆ You want to build a strong public involvement program because the impact of a project will be relatively broad.

- ◆ You want a forum that will build trust and bridge stakeholder differences by allowing diverse interests to work together, feeling free to express their opinions and finding mutually acceptable solutions based on common interests.
- ◆ You are seeking to build partnerships among stakeholders in order to bring more resources and expertise to develop alternative solutions.
- ◆ Certain stakeholders will be ultimately responsible for implementation and ongoing management decisions. Other stakeholders are less likely to block implementation if they understand that a plan or policy reflects their input and is crafted to meet their basic interests.

When Not to Use Consensus Building

You probably should use another decision-making process when:

- ◆ You need a quick solution because a community or organization faces an emergency situation.
- ◆ You find that a community or stakeholders are so polarized that face-to-face discussions are not possible, or likewise, there is overwhelming ambivalence or apathy which may surface later in the project.
- ◆ You are using the process only to create the appearance of openness and have no intention of using the outcomes. If this happens, significant sense of everlasting distrust can emerge eliminating any chances of reaching a decision that participants can accept.
- ◆ A particular issue is best settled in a political or legal forum.

Differences and Diversities

Opinions are like belly buttons. Everyone has one and no two are the same. The magnificent thing is differences in perspectives lead to the diversity that makes democratic societies great. Eugene McCarthy said, “As long as the differences and diversities of mankind exist, democracy must allow for compromise, for accommodation, and for the recognition of differences.”

Consensus building can be applied in most cases to reach common ground through compromise, accommodation and recognition of differences. Dwight D. Eisenhower said, “People talk about the middle of the road as though it were unacceptable. Actually, all human problems, excepting morals, come into the gray areas. Things are not all black and white. There have to be compromises. The middle of the road is all of the usable surface. The extremes, right and left, are in the gutters.”

Like an old Chinese proverb says, “It doesn’t matter if a cat is black or white; as long as it catches mice, it’s a good cat.”

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