

Methodology: **C o n s e n s u s** as a basis in decision-making

BACKGROUND

- A group wants a **decision that all members endorse** and support...
- The problem/question for which a solution/answer is to be found is **clear** to all; if the issue is complex, it's broken down into distinct sub-questions
- The group is aware that it may cost more **time and effort** than an "imposed" decision (e.g. if the responsibility is delegated to one person or small group)

Consensus ≠ Compromise !

Hypothesis:

The result will be a more **sustainable** decision

LEVELS OF CONSENSUS – CONSOLIDATING INDIVIDUAL POSITIONS

This section focuses on the point of the decision-making process where the proposed solutions are "tested" by the group. Using a set of pre-defined positions can facilitate this crucial step. An overview of the whole process is given in the following section.

LEVELS of CONSENSUS	
	Complete agreement "I endorse this proposed solution."
	Slight reservations "I endorse this proposal, but I have slight reservations."
	Abstention "I'm leaving the decision to you, but will participate in the implementation."
	Stand aside "I cannot support this proposal, but will let it take place anyway (however I will not participate)."
	Strong reservations "I have strong reservations and hope a different decision will be made."
	Veto "The proposal fundamentally contradicts my views. It may not be chosen or implemented."

- Select one specific solution proposal at a time
- **Show of opinions** – each group member selects one level of consensus which best fits his/her position and makes it known, e.g. by holding up a card in the respective colour
- Document the result, e.g. note a count per colour
- Possibly: assess the existing **reservations** right away – if a detailed overview of the individual opinions is wanted.
Alternatively: come back to this later (5th step) – if the aim is to first get a feel for the "mood" of the group.
- Repeat for next proposed solution...
=> either until all proposals have been addressed,
=> or until one proposal emerges as earning "full endorsement" by all group members and everyone agrees to make this the final decision

Levels of consensus as defined by the 'Werkstatt für Gewaltfreie Aktion Baden' (Freiburg, Germany); translation by Eva von Falkenstein

- Ideally, one of the solution proposals will emerge as preferable to all group members – possibly with a few amendments or added details to meet existing (slight) reservations.
- If it is not as simple as that, go for the "least critical" proposal and assess the (strong) reservations existing within the group, then try and find ways to amend this proposal, meeting the expressed criticism.
=> This may be hard work, but always remember the potential great prize of getting a consensus in the end!
- Finally, it may be necessary to return to the 2nd or 3rd step – and to search for further solutions. In this case, try using different discussion methodologies, or changing the setting/work constellation (see "THIS MAY HELP"). A person with facilitation knowledge will have ideas!

Note that the wording of the levels of consensus definitions presented here follows the principle of clearly expressing your own personal opinion from the first person perspective. This may be important for acceptance and legitimation. Especially in a group where all members are considered equally important (typical for those favouring consensus), each single (personal) opinion is valuable – regardless of whether others share the same view or not.

THE WHOLE PROCESS (Strongly condensed!)

- 1st. Formulate the goal of the decision (e.g. "to find a solution for problem XYZ")
=> formulate a question (e.g. "What should we do to solve problem XYZ?")
- 2nd. Assess the situation/problem from the (different) perspectives group members may have.
- 3rd. When all agree that the situation/problem is clearly and sufficiently described, move on to developing solution proposals – maybe via a preliminary step of determining desirable qualities of such a solution.
=> Document the proposals, make a comprehensive list!
- 4th. Ideally the final step: Capture the mood of the group regarding the proposed solution(s), and make the range of individual opinions "visible" to all by using pre-defined levels of consensus (see previous page).

If no consensus emerges at this point:

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- 5th. Assess the reservations group members have (ask "Why?")
=> Some new aspects may be added to the problem assessment (2nd step), or maybe a simple misunderstanding is the reason, or a detail may need to be specified, or...
Then: Repeat the 4th step!

THIS MAY HELP (Not a conclusive list!)

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| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> * Atmosphere of "freedom of thought & speech" | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> > <i>encourages participation</i> |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> * Formulate as precisely as possible (statements & questions) and speak from a first-person perspective ("I"-messages) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> > <i>helps prevent misunderstandings and reduce personal conflicts between members, keeps focus on factual level of the problem</i> |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> * Avoid generalisations (e.g. always, never, everybody), accusations and allegations | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> > <i>helps understand "real" motivations and drivers of opinions and actions (often not directly addressed)</i> |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> * Ask "WHY?" | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> > <i>helps get all perspectives together as a "common knowledge" basis for the group, and prevents getting "hung up" on one single proposal too early</i> |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> * Focus first on the problem, and (then) on the qualities the solution should have; save actual solution proposals for later (separate step)! | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> > <i>values all contributions, safeguards the work already done and facilitates continuation/additions/changes later on</i> |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> * Document / visualize the key points addressed as the group's "common memory" (esp. during 2nd and 3rd steps)
=> contributions that don't really fit in the current step can be recorded in a designated "storage place" (e.g. a separate flip chart sheet) and come back to later in the process | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> > <i>may save time, increase creativity and input diversity – loosens up the atmosphere...</i> |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> * Change the setting / constellation for interim steps, e.g. work on one question in smaller groups, then present outcome to the whole group | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> > <i>like previous point – besides being a "simple human necessity", it can work miracles especially when the atmosphere becomes "explosive"</i> |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> * Take breaks!
Care for physical well-being (fresh air, drinks & snacks, restroom, quietness, move around) and provide possibility for "mental digestion" (think about what has been said in group, clarify own opinion, talk to other group member "outside the arena") | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> > <i>especially helpful if the problem is complex, or if strongly opposing opinions (or rivalries) exist in the group</i> |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> * Last but not least:
Designate or invite a (neutral) facilitator to watch over and guide the group through the process, propose alternative discussion methodologies, etc. | |