



Building Consensus

What is consensus?

Consensus may be defined as an idea that is broadly supported across a group, even if it is not really the "favorite" of each individual.

Why build consensus?

When people feel that 1) they are consulted, and 2) their ideas and concerns have been captured and considered, then they are more likely to support a proposed action. Whereas a majority vote might identify what most people in a group want, building consensus helps build wider support for an idea and action.

Considerations. Building consensus can slow down a process and may require compromise.

How do you build consensus?

Building consensus requires an inclusive (include as many relevant people as possible), collaborative, participatory process. Include all interested parties. Typically, someone will have to facilitate the process. This person must be seen as unbiased.

Running the meetings.

1. **Set guidelines.** Indicate that
 - People are to be professional – not personal. It is okay to seek clarification or disagree, but don't make comments personal. Concerns are to be expressed in an "Unconditionally Constructive" manner. **Note:** Small group discussions can continue after the meeting or during breaks,
 - The chair or facilitator should keep the process moving along, but make sure participants feel it is their meeting.
2. **Clearly state meeting objectives.** Clarify what is being discussed (and perhaps what is not included).
3. **Allow time.** As time is often limited, set clear limits, but allow time for discussion – even if another meeting is required. People must feel they have been listened to.
4. **Collect input** - Have someone record meeting output. Key points from discussion may be captured on a board and/or participants might write down their input on cards (that can be displayed in a central area).
5. **Be aware of hierarchies.** Participants should feel that they are participating as equals so that they will openly express their views. You may have to state that all input is to be valued. You may also consider:
 - a. Bosses and/or experts may choose to not join a meeting or part of it. Such absence can help ensure that members are truly expressing their opinions and are not simply saying what they think the senior person wants to hear.
 - b. Prior to the meeting, build the confidence of participants by encouraging them to think about and discuss the issues among themselves so that they come to the meeting prepared. They may then choose someone more senior to represent the views of their sub-group in the meeting.
6. **Sort input** – Look for patterns and common ideas. Any ideas that may serve as a distraction can be captured and identified for later discussion or for further clarification.
7. **Present major conclusions** Present conclusions and check with the group that there is general agreement.

Note: People will contribute and build on discussion once they know their ideas have been heard and recorded. If they think they have not been heard, they will tend to repeat the same points many times.

