Consensus Based Decision Making

Guiding Principles
A Working Definition of Consensus

Derives from the Latin *con* meaning “with” or “together with” and *sentir* meaning to “think” or “feel”.

So, *“consensus”* means to *“think or feel together.”*

Consensus is a process by which a common mind of the meeting is sought about the wisest way forward on a particular issue at the time.
Consensus decision making is...

• A cooperative process for making decisions in which everyone consents to the decisions of the group
  – Not everyone’s first preference necessarily, but true consent
  – Decisions should reflect the integrated will of the whole group
  – Preserves the interests and integrity of all participants

• A problem-solving orientation for people who wish to work together
  – Not a process for determining whose ideas are best, but searching together for the best solution for the group
  – A questioning process, not the “okey-dokey”
  – The decision is in this room — our job is to find it
  – Have respect and enjoy creative conflict
Our Twelve Concepts

Our Twelve Concepts are guiding principles for our service structure. The concepts summarize the hard-won experience of our fellowship’s first forty years with such things as responsibility, authority, delegation, leadership, accountability, spiritual guidance, participation, communication, open-mindedness, fairness, and finances. The Twelve Concepts, together, help ensure that our fellowship’s service structure remains forever devoted to service, not government.

The Twelve Concepts for NA Service described here are intended to be practically applied to our service structure at every level. The spiritual ideals of our steps and traditions provide the basis for these concepts, which are tailored to the specific needs of our fellowship’s service structure. The concepts encourage our groups to more readily achieve our traditions’ ideals, and our service structure to function effectively and responsibly.
Traditions and Concepts

• Tradition 2. For our group conscience there is but one ultimate authority – a loving God as he may express himself in our group conscience. Our leaders are but trusted servants; they do not govern.

• Concept 6 – Group Conscience is the spiritual means by which we invite a loving God to influence our decisions.

• Concept 9 – All elements of our service structure have the responsibility to carefully consider all viewpoints in their decision making processes.
Consensus Flowchart

- Ideas and Roundtable Sessions
- Step 1 – Introduce and Clarify Issues to be decided
  - Share relevant information
  - Identify the Key Questions
  - Break into small discussion groups
Step 2 – Explore the Issue and Look for Ideas

• Gather Initial thoughts and reactions; What are the issues and people’s concerns?
• Collect Ideas about *solving* the problem – take notes
• Have a *broad ranging* discussion and debate the ideas – Disccuss pros and cons
• Eliminate some ideas; short list others
Step 3 Look for Emerging Proposals

• Look for a proposal that weaves together the best elements of the ideas discussed at the roundtables
• Look for a solution that addresses the key concerns
Step 4 – Discuss, Clarify, Amend, Agree to Proposal

- Ensure remaining concerns are heard
- Ensure everyone has contributed
- Ask for any additional concerns or amendments
Step 5 – Test for Consensus

• Initial Straw poll – (Voice Vote)
• Determine (Facilitators) Opposition or Support level
• Open discussion if not unanimous reminding participants if there is strong support either way then the minority voice should be heard first
• Discipline yourselves to not speak if not introducing something entirely new to the discussion
• Final Straw Poll
Ideally...

• concerns and reservations will be identified and addressed though the consensus decision-making process

• When the call for consensus on a proposal is made, you should ASSENT if you support the proposal, all things considered.

• Assent does not indicate that you may agree with every aspect of a proposal, but that you...
  – have heard the discussion,
  – have had a chance to participate in the process of finalizing the proposal, and
  – are prepared to support the final proposal.

• Assent is signified by remaining silent.
Three Degrees of Dissent

- Assent with Reservations
- Stand Aside
- Block
Three Degrees of Dissent

• Assent with Reservations
  
  “I think this may be a mistake but I can live with it”

  – Assent with Reservations if you are willing to let a motion pass but want to register your concerns
  – Do so by raising your hand and, when called on by the facilitator, simply saying “Assent with Reservations.” The assumption is that the reservations have been heard already, and you are simply noting that you can support the proposal and continue to have these reservations.
  – If there are significant reservations about a proposal, the body may choose to modify or re-word it.

• Stand Aside

• Block
Three Degrees of Dissent

- Assent with Reservations
- Stand Aside
  
  “I personally can’t do this, but I won’t stop others from doing it.”
  
  - Stand Aside if you have a serious personal disagreement with a proposal, but are willing to let the proposal pass. The concerns of group members standing aside are usually addressed by modifications to the proposal.
  
  - A sizable number of Stand Asides (~33% or more) of those present will indicate that a consensus to adopt the proposal is too weak. The proposal is then either dropped or delegated to the maker of the proposal or an Ad Hoc Committee for reworking.

- Block
Three Degrees of Dissent

• Assent with Reservations
• Stand Aside
• Block -- “I cannot support this or allow the group to support this. It is against our principles.”
  – A rare and extreme form of dissent taken only if you honestly believe that one of the Traditions or Concepts is directly violated by a proposal or that some very fundamental moral position would be violated.
  – A GSR who blocks must be able to articulate which Tradition, Concept or Spiritual principle fundamental to NA is violated by the proposal.
  – We will apply the “Unanimity minus five” (or U-5) system which recognizes the ability of 5 or more GSRs to actively block a decision.
  – If consensus is blocked or no reasonable consensus can be reached, the group stays with whatever the previous decision was on the subject or does nothing.
CDM Requires Practicing Spiritual Principles such as...

- Patience
- Open-mindedness
- Trust
- Faith
- Good will
- Honesty
Common Mistakes in Consensus Based Decision making

1. Inappropriate Blocks
2. Enabling Bad Behavior
3. Poor Planning
4. Repetitive Discussion by members
5. Starting From a Proposal instead of an Issue or idea
6. Too Many Details
7. Rushing the Process
8. Spending all Meeting Time in Open Discussion
9. Attaching Proposals to People
10. Fuzzy Minutes
1. Inappropriate Blocks

- Block because you disagree
- Block because you object
- Block because you don’t like the proposal
- or Block because you don’t like the person who made the proposal
- Have always done it this way
- Premature Blocks
- Blocks used as threats (if.... Then.....)
Considerations on “Blocks”

• Consensus only works if the power to block is restricted to clear and detailed conflicts with our Core Principles (12, 12 and 12)
• Blocking does not have to mean the end of the discussion
• The block itself if well thought out and based in core principles can actually hold the solution to moving forward
2. Enabling Bad Behavior

• Disrespectful statements to another member
• Sarcasm
• Jokes at the expense of others
• Yelling
• Speaking multiple times or when someone else is speaking
• Unsubstantiated blocks
• “Instant” proposals or “instant” blocks
Solutions to Bad Behavior

• Assertive Facilitator keeping Atmosphere of recovery
• Entire group committed to maintaining Atmosphere of Recovery
• Self Policing of Members to focus, listen and be fully attentive to each other
• Not speaking if your idea was already spoken even if you have a “better” way of saying it
• Remain Open Minded (see previous list of principles)
• Agree to Disagree and then find a way to move forward that will benefit NA as a whole not just your Group, Area, Subcommittee or Region
3. Poor Planning

• **Everyone** should be prepared - People’s time and energy are important to them.
• Facilitator should have a clear agenda and be familiar with items in agenda
• Members should have an Agenda in front of them (knowledge of agenda prior is helpful)
• Be realistic with time constraints
• Prioritize the agenda early
• Avoid lengthy repetitive reports
• Take appropriate timed breaks and use self discipline to keep breaks uniform and brief
4. Inappropriate Discussion or Presentation

- Having too many people say the same thing a “different” or “better” way
- Facilitators must remain neutral
- Hearing the majority opinion prior to hearing the minority opinion
- Cutting the debate short when not everyone has been heard that has something new to add
- Selecting the same people to speak on every proposal
5. Starting from a Proposal instead of an Issue or Idea

- The more complex a proposal the more time should be allotted to discussing and amending it
- Can cause decisions to be made without hearing all possibilities or options
- Can lead to hasty decisions
6. Too Many details

• Minutely detailed Proposals tend to lose the audience
• Proposals should be easily understood, clearly stated, with clear purpose or intent and method to implement; resources to implement
• Discussion easily gets off track from main intent of Proposal
7. Rushing the Process

• Leads to inappropriate blocks
• All concerns may not be heard – Hear all viewpoints – Trust the Wisdom of the whole
• Hasty decisions are made
• Resentments are formed
• Members feel more or less important depending which side of the discussion they are on
• Do not move on until fully resolved
8. Limit Discussion

• Carefully limit discussion and agree on this prior to start of discussion on any proposal
• Allow initial Straw Poll to guide length of discussion required
• Roundtable prior if necessary
• Hear the minority first if there is one
• Take multiple straw polls
• Limit repetitive statements
• Maintain an Atmosphere of Recovery
9. Attaching Proposals to people

• Once a proposal is on the floor it belongs to the entire group and not an individual or a group

• Do not ask the Proposer permission to modify – This is a holdover from Robert’s Rules (“friendly”Amendment) – The group as a whole decides on modifications

• Expect EVERY Proposal to get modified
10. Fuzzy Minutes

• Do not try to take verbatim notes
• Record in Bullet Points as ideas and Proposals evolve
• Do record the final decision accurately
• Do record the “idea” of or intent of how it evolved to its final form
• Record the concerns (stand asides) for future reference if needed)
• Record TASKS FOR IMPLEMENTATION – who will do what and when and where will the resources come from
Working With Blocks and Concerns

- Assume Good faith Intentions by All
- Listen Closely
- Listen Closely
- Listen Closely
- Reflect back the main points and intents
- Look for what the needs are underneath the concern
- Act as an ally of the concerned individual but hold on to the needs of the whole
- Remember that differing opinions are a resource
- Learn something from the concerns
- SEEK COMMON GROUND!
Ask Questions

• How do you see this idea?
• What are you worried might happen?
• How will that follow from this decision?
• What parts of the proposal do you support
• What are the changes that would allow you to support this proposal?
• How would your changes serve the needs of the Whole?
Reflective Listening Guidelines

Key Skill in Resolving Problems

• Keep your attention focused on the person speaking
• Respond to what that person said not your own agenda
• Be non-judgemental
• Listen with compassion & open-mindedness
• Seek the essence of what the other person is expressing
• Keep your goals on what is best for the Whole
5 Basics for Facilitation

1. You are the Servant of the Group
2. Plan ahead and work outside the meeting
3. Help each person feel heard – Hear all viewpoints
4. Work with all of what’s in the room
5. Listen for Common Ground and reflect it back to the group as often as necessary
6. Reflect the Primary and common purpose as often as necessary
7. Reiterate the proposal’s intent during discussion
8. Maintain an Atmosphere of Recovery
Options for Unresolved Concern or Deadlock

• Lay it over to a future Meeting (Do not allow a hasty decision “so we can all go home”)
• Send it to an ad-hoc committee with the minority opinion fully represented
• Lay it aside and take up at later point in meeting
• Determine if it is a dead horse. If so lay it down. RARE occurrence. This should be used carefully as it affects the entire group.
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<tr>
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<th>Robert’s Rules of Order</th>
<th>Consensus Decision Making</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Competitive, win/lose</td>
<td>Problem-solving, cooperative</td>
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<tr>
<td>Discussion constrained by motion</td>
<td>Multiple concerns and info can be considered</td>
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<tr>
<td>Discussion takes the form of a debate with a win-lose approach.</td>
<td>Discussion involves active listening and sharing information.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Few constraints are placed on the order or frequency of speaking.</td>
<td>Norms limit number of times one asks to speak to ensure that each speaker is fully heard.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Differences resolved by voting on motion.</td>
<td>Differences resolved by discussion. Facilitator identifies areas of agreement and names disagreements to push discussion deeper.</td>
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<td>Chair calls for a vote.</td>
<td>Facilitator articulates the sense of the discussion, asks if there are other concerns, and proposes a &quot;minute&quot; of the decision.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Winners and losers are identified. Decision belongs to the winners.</td>
<td>Group as a whole is responsible for the decision, and the decision belongs to the group.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Chair's vote can determine the decision when votes are tied.</td>
<td>Facilitator can discern if a minority concerns’ warrant a delay in a decision.</td>
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<td>Dissenters' perspectives suppressed in majority vote.</td>
<td>Dissenters' perspectives are embraced and incorporated into decisions.</td>
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