



toolbox

Facilitating Consensus Decisions



“Consensus means that every member of the group can live with the group’s final decision. It does not mean that every member completely agrees with the decision. Consensus is often the means by which highly participative groups members reach their decisions, especially if they favor a highly egalitarian approach to decision making.”

- Carter McNamara, from the Free Management Library

The following guidelines are from Peter Hille, former Director of the Brushy Fork Institute, and from Smart Leaders Smarter Teams, by Roger Schwarz - *regarding focusing on ‘interests’ rather than ‘position’.

Develop criteria that everyone agrees on, then apply these criteria to each of the choices. When developing criteria, focus on the *interests* of those involved, not their *positions*. * Positions are the predetermined solutions or conclusions that individuals bring to the table, while interests are the underlying needs and motivations of the individuals. Interests may be unrecognized or unexamined but they nevertheless drive the assumptions and feelings about the situation. The goal is to uncover and examine the interests, and work to find common interests those solutions should address. Example: “Regardless of the specifics of any solution we develop, it will need to”

Focus attention - As a general rule of thumb, it is easier to eliminate than to select. For example, if you go through your list of ideas and apply the criteria you develop, it may become obvious that some items should be eliminated and others definitely included. You need only to discuss the ones in between, those that are not obviously eliminated or included. This is much easier than discussing the relative merits of each point.

When there is disagreement among group members can take a **poll** to see where everyone stands.

If only one or two people disagree, they must consider whether or not their objections merit holding things up. Everyone must be willing to be flexible and to ask themselves how important their reservations really are.

If someone believes their objection really is important, they must say so. There may be an important point that the group has overlooked. That group member should state their thought clearly and concisely, without going on at great length.

If the group is split, or if a lone dissenter feels quite strongly, don’t just kick the issue back and forth endlessly or take a long time to re-explain positions. **Figure out which aspects everyone does agree on and try to find a third alternative** that suits all parties.

If you find yourself disagreeing with someone, be sure to really listen to what they are saying—you may not have understood their point. Also, the other person will be more likely to be flexible once they know they have been heard and understood. It may help to restate their point back to them, something like, “Now let me see if I’ve got this—you’re saying that . . .” This not only makes sure that YOU understand their point, it also lets THEM know that you understand.

If the group gets stuck on one thing, go on to something else. Stay within the time allotted. Come back to the sticky point later in the meeting, or put it on the agenda for the next meeting, or assign a subcommittee to work on it.