

Making Decisions

Reaching Consensus in Team Meetings

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One of the School Development Program's (SDP) guiding principles is that decisions are made by consensus. But what exactly is consensus, and how does one reach it? This chapter contrasts consensus decision making with voting, and explains how reaching consensus in SDP schools translates into increasingly appropriate action steps supported by continuously improving relationships between team members. Strategies are included to help group leaders during the process.

consensus . . . [from the Latin *consentire* . . . to feel together, to agree—related to consent] . . . harmony, cooperation, or sympathy [especially] in different parts of an organism . . . group solidarity in sentiment and belief . . . collective opinion: the judgment arrived at by most of those concerned . . .

—Webster's Third New International Dictionary

CONSENSUS DECISION MAKING IS AN ONGOING PROCESS

In School Development Program (SDP) teams, subcommittees, and classrooms, many important decisions are made by consensus. Groups strive to “find,”

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“achieve,” and “reach” consensus. Spoken of in this way, the word consensus sounds like a thing or a place. So it is useful to remember that consensus is actually the result of a process that takes place between people.

Groups should make an effort to monitor that process. The quality of their interactions will strengthen or weaken any group’s ability to make decisions and take actions in the future. Before there can be a collective opinion, there must first be a respectful process of gathering all the individual opinions. Then there must be a respectful process of discussing, evaluating, combining, and choosing among them. It is also worth noting that any decision reached through consensus is actually only a temporary decision that will be reassessed whenever necessary.

SDP school communities receive ongoing training and support from national and local facilitators in the most effective and respectful ways to interact. Because they become skilled at thinking about their own interactions as well as the things they’re discussing, SDP teams and subcommittees can truly say that consensus is one of their guiding principles.

THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN VOTING AND CONSENSUS: DIGITAL VERSUS ANALOGUE

The chief alternative way school groups make decisions is by voting. Any situation in which there are only two options—like the on and off positions of a light switch—is called a “digital” situation (Bateson, 1972/2000; O’Connor & Seymour, 1990). Voting, which requires approval or disapproval of a proposal, is therefore digital. Offering alternatives is often seen as complicating, confusing, or even obstructing the voting process. The voter faces a forced choice, and the results can even be tabulated mechanically.

When votes are taken in schools, the difference in real (and perceived) power and authority between members of the school community causes some individuals to feel they do not have the status, the right, or the ability to speak out about certain proposals. This situation, in which some people have (or are perceived to have) all the power and others have (or are perceived to have) none, is also digital.

In addition, the digital quality of voting produces the following drawbacks:

- Many people vote, but typically only a few people select the option to be voted on.
- Those for and against the option limit their time and energy to thinking about ways to get support for their side.
- People focus on the option presented and limit their thinking about what is needed and possible.
- Because the choice seems simple (it’s either yes or no, after all), the vote may be taken before the voters have a chance to fully examine the option.
- There are winners and losers, and the losers may become disaffected from further participation or may be angry enough to try to undermine the outcome determined by the vote.

By contrast, a situation in which there is a spectrum (a continuum) of options is called an “analogue” situation (Bateson, 1972/2000; O’Connor & Seymour, 1990). It is continuously variable (even if that variability is between two limits), like the

dimmer switch on a light fixture or (if you like even more choice) like a high-tech control panel for lighting and sound, with a full array of levers and dials that can create an almost infinite variety of options between nothing at all and everything, full blast, at once.

The consensus process, therefore, is analogue. Any manageable number of options may be on the table. The options are considered, and combined or selected until all participants feel well-represented and are clear that the students will be well-served by the decision. A type of voting (polling or asking or choosing) is the formal last step of the consensus process, but actually this polling occurs throughout the process as (1) more and more people indicate clearly that they agree with what is being discussed, and (2) fewer and fewer people offer objections while clearly staying engaged in the discussion.

The analogue quality of the consensus process also produces the following benefits:

- Any real or perceived power differential is parked outside the meeting room because group members are required to engage in the process and are supported by facilitators as they develop skills for engaging appropriately.
- The number of people welcome to put options on the table equals the number of people involved in the final choice.
- More than one opinion or option is welcome from each person, so no one needs to back or be backed into a corner defending a single idea.
- People are stimulated to make suggestions about anything that already is or might be on the table.
- The decision-making process opens up to include input from as many people as can contribute to the best possible decision.
- The process continues until the options are fully examined.
- There is no formal choosing until virtually everyone can agree at least to give the most-favored option a real-world try.
- The option chosen is monitored as it is put into practice and will be reassessed as needed, not according to some preset calendar.

THE CONSENSUS PROCESS ENLARGES THE SCHOOL COMMUNITY

Whereas the voting process is inherently exclusive, whittling choices down to a single one, the consensus process is inherently inclusive because it brings not only more ideas but also more people into the life of the school. In order to discover the best ways to meet students' needs, group members reach out to others in and beyond the school. Each person has many contacts, any of whom could be important.

Suppose, for example, that each person in a 10-person group reaches out to 2 people outside the school (for example, parents in other schools, former college professors, business associates, the community service teacher in a local high school, a local newspaper reporter or editor, a librarian, the owner of a computer store or supermarket, an administrator or worker at a hospital). Each group member requests information, ideas, and/or support for the same project. Then suppose that 3 of those 20 people reach out to 2 more people in their own networks and suggest that they get in touch with the members of the original group. Now there are 26 additional people who are actual or potential sources of information and support.

Now multiply these sources times several projects under discussion. The potential to involve additional caring adults is obviously very great.

Schools can encourage an ongoing relationship with these people. Their names, titles, affiliations, contact numbers, and the information and/or service they provided (or could provide in the future) to the group members can easily be kept in a database, now that computers are widely available in schools. How hard could it be to keep them posted by e-mail, letting them know how appreciated their input has been and the ongoing outcomes of the program that was shaped in part by their input?

Once they get in the habit of hearing from the group, these new contacts may also begin to think of the group when something interesting crosses their desk. They may reach out to their own colleagues as well, who may become involved in the school or in another school, and so the benefits may spread from school to school. In this way, the consensus process precipitates an ongoing interest in the learning and development of students and their families.

THE CONSENSUS PROCESS STRENGTHENS ATTITUDES AND SKILLS THAT ARE VALUABLE IN ALL ASPECTS OF LIFE

A machine can tabulate votes, but no machine can perform any part of the consensus process, which requires thoughtful communication between members of the group, nonjudgmental observation of other people's cues, a positive attitude, and a commitment to achieving an outcome acceptable to all. The more frequently people engage positively and productively in the process, the more effortless and natural they find it to be.

This also means that they come to accept taking more time to reach decisions. Classic voting often accomplishes a "quick fix," but this shortchanges a group's potential because the focus is on getting something done instead of building the group's skills and capacity while maintaining and strengthening current and future relationships.

SOME STRATEGIES FOR GROUP LEADERS DURING THE CONSENSUS PROCESS

- If the group is having difficulty agreeing about an item, ask the group to put that item into "the parking lot" until a specified time or point in the process.
- Ask the group to tag each interim decision as being "tentative," pending more information or a better idea in the future (up to a specified time). Nothing is permanent until the end.
- Make graphic representations of all options. This stores them for closer, longer observation and reduces the tension of group members who want to make sure they're being heard. It allows easy "cut-and-paste" merging of several parts of different options into a new, composite option.

- When being challenged, or when feeling like challenging another person (two situations in which relationships might suffer), make meta-comments about the self (self-commentary as if one were a resourceful observer). For example,
 - “I hear your objection. I can’t give you a response right now, though. I need to think about this. I’ll get back to it again *[in a specified time]*.”
 - “I don’t know why I’m responding negatively. . . . I seem to have an objection, even though I can’t put my finger on it right now. I’d like to think about it.”

Consensus is not time bound and thus allows for a decision to be altered in order to reach the desired goal.

REFERENCES

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To read more about how SDP teaches people to become skilled at thinking about their own interactions, see “A Team Approach to Educational Change,” Chapter 10 in *Six Pathways to Healthy Child Development and Academic Success: The Field Guide to Comer Schools in Action* in this series.