

Summary of How Consensus Works

What is Consensus?

1. Consensus is a decision-making process which involves gathering and considering diverse perspectives and synthesizing them. It allows members to work together to improve a proposal to make it the best decision for the group. It requires a commitment to active cooperation, disciplined speaking and listening and a creative response to conflict. At the North Lanark County Community Health Centre, the board and its committees use a decision-making process based on consensus.

How a Meeting Run by Consensus Works

Discussion:

2. The Chairperson opens the meeting, announces agenda items and invites the person presenting the issue to speak. Presenters clearly state the issue and where the meeting feedback or decision is required. The chairperson then opens the floor for discussion.

3. When participants wish to speak on a subject, they raise their hand. The chairperson will then call on them to speak. They address comments to the group as a whole and not solely to the chairperson or the person introducing the agenda item. When more than one person wishes to speak, the chairperson will record their names chronologically on a *speakers' list*. They will be called upon in that order. (There are a few exceptions to this and they are outlined under "Speakers' List" below).

4. A "*Time Out*" may be called to interrupt a discussion if a participant is unable to participate because of, for example, distractions or uncertainty. Everyone will try to resolve the problem before continuing with the discussion.

5. During the discussion, the chairperson, primarily, and participants, as well, are responsible for

- a) ensuring that participants have an opportunity to be part of the discussion,
- b) keeping the discussion on topic and moving toward resolution,
- c) providing clarification and rephrasing of complex or confusing matters,
- d) summarizing agreements and differences in viewpoint,
- e) identifying new issues as they arise,
- f) ensuring all viewpoints are heard and understood by the group as a whole, and
- g) identifying problems with the group's process and trying to remedy them.

Decision-making:

6. When a matter is put before the meeting everyone with something to add to the discussion speaks. The chairperson's role is to summarize the emerging areas of agreement into a proposal. No decision is made until everyone feels that his/her position on the matter has been heard, understood and considered.

7. The chairperson may then *test for consensus* by re-stating the proposal that is being supported by the members. If there are no blocks to consensus, then the chairperson announces that a decision in favour of the proposal has been made. The recorder notes the decision in the minutes of the meeting. If there are areas of disagreement, these are further discussed, and either resolved or referred to a group to work on and report back to the next meeting.

8. A consensus decision is the best decision to which all can agree. It may not be the preferred option for some members, but if they can accept it, consensus exists. It means that objections to the proposal have given a full hearing, are understood and have been considered in coming to the decision.

9. When the chairperson tests for consensus on a proposal that a member does not fully support, the member can express his/her objections by either "*standing aside*" or by "*blocking consensus*."

10. A member *stands aside*, when s/he has any of the following opinions:

- "I don't see the need for this, but I'll go along"
- "I think this may be a mistake, but I can live with it"
- "I personally can't do this, but I won't stop others from doing it."

When a member "stands aside," the consensus is not blocked, so a decision in favour of the proposal is still made.

If Consensus can't be reached

11. If a member cannot support a proposal and cannot allow the rest of the meeting to support it, then that member should express their position by "*blocking consensus*." This is the strongest form of disagreement. A person who blocks consensus is saying, "I cannot support this or allow the group to support this." To block consensus is to state a belief that to proceed in the way proposed is wrong.

12. When the timing of a decision critical to the organization does not allow for a consensus to be developed, a vote may be taken to decide the issue. Consensus is first sought to move to a vote on the issue. If there is a block to consensus here, then generally there is no vote. In this situation, a

meeting member may ask for a “vote to vote.” If a majority of members agree to a vote, then one is held to make the decision.

Conclusion

13. These Rules of Procedure have been developed as a guide. Over time, we may feel that we can follow the general principles but modify our approach slightly. The key is that all times participants understand the process and the meeting unfolds in an effective and harmonious way.