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**Leading Great Meetings**

# Consensus Guidelines

## Practical Approaches to Consensus Decisions

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### What Is It?

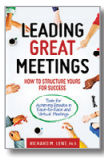
Consensus means reaching a decision that all support. If someone has an objection to something under consideration, then consensus has not been achieved. Consensus also means that the opinion of each participant is equal to others. **Consensus Guidelines** helps you achieve this type of decision.

### Why Use It?

Consensus can be a practical and powerful form of decision making with a group if you approach it in an effective way. Unfortunately, it is often poorly done. As a result, many of us see it as time-consuming or impractical to achieve. Some discussions may default to “pseudo-consensus.” In this case, consensus is assumed but perhaps weak and untested—unless someone takes the (risky) step of challenging the presumed decision.

### How to Apply **Consensus Guidelines**

There are two ways to achieve consensus with a group. You can use either one or both in combination.



### **Option 1: Clarifying Agreement and Respecting Disagreement**

Often it is possible to achieve consensus on most aspects of some proposed decision, but there are a few “sticking points” that keep it from achieving complete support. You may be able to achieve consensus on part if not all of the decision by separating points where there is consensus from those where there is disagreement.

- Specific areas of agreement are defined and separated as necessary from those points that are not agreed by all.
- Areas of disagreement should be defined, recorded, and respected as areas “not (yet) agreed.” These areas can be revisited in the future as work begins on implementing the areas where there is initial agreement.

This process depends on effective use of **Visible Note Taking** so that all can see the points agreed, and/or points set aside as not (yet) agreed.

### **Option 2: Building Consensus by Go-Around**

This approach begins with one person presenting the proposed decision. Anyone may ask a clarifying question as needed. The process to achieve consensus then goes as follows:

- 1) **Reaction round:** Lead a **Go-Around** to hear each person’s reaction to the proposal. A brief (30-second) comment from each person should be enough. This is not a time for additional proposals or amendments nor is it time to go back and forth between two or more of the group members.
- 2) **Revising the proposal:** The person making the original proposal can now revise it based on all comments received and present the revised proposal back to the group.
- 3) **Clarifying objection round:** Next, go around the group again and ask for any objections to the revised proposal. Objections must be based on a personal concern or interest and explained to the group.
- 4) **Improving the proposal:** As a group, discuss how to improve the proposal, or remove parts of it, or include precautions or limits to the proposal. Complete any revisions.
- 5) **Final round to check that there are no more objections:** Once again go around the group to give each person a chance to speak briefly about their support or concerns with this last version of the proposal. This is not a time



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for debate, but an opportunity to verify that there is (or is not) consensus given the revised/improved proposal. As relevant, identify and record the decision and any action items.

A consensus decision-making session should always end with a “no-objection” round to clarify the nature of the group’s final consensus decision. If agreement has not been reached on all aspects of the proposal, this final no-objection round can be to confirm that all support some aspects and to clarify those areas where disagreements remain (per Option 1 above).

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### Related Tools and Information

Related or supporting tools include: **Go-Around**, **80/20 Principle**, **Visible Note Taking**. For further information on how to make consensus practical using Option 1, see Weisbord and Janoff (2010, 59-60). For more information on Option 2, see Buck and Villines (2007).