**Northwest Cooperative
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Cooperative Starter Series #8
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Consensus Decision-Making

Consensus decision-making is a process that seeks to arrive at decisions that everyone can live with, by seeking to resolve or mitigate the concerns of the minority. In contrast, voting simply overrides the concerns of that minority, without regard for the effect on the group's long-term unity. The consensus process is based on the assumption that every member of the group has a valid perspective that is potentially crucial to making good decisions. It requires everyone in the group to be committed to common goals that are clearly understood, and to be able to differentiate between their personal preferences and what will help the group achieve its goals.

Is Consensus For You?

Consensus is not for every group. It is unfamiliar to many people, and requires a relatively high level of trust, understanding, and skills among participants in order to work well. On the other hand, it produces high-quality decisions, and the effort to make consensus work can pay off when it comes to implementing the decision.

Consensus becomes more challenging with larger groups, so your size should be a consideration in deciding if consensus is right for your group. It is generally understood that consensus becomes unrealistic for groups with more than a couple dozen participants, but there are some exceptions to this rule, including Country Natural Beef and the Fremont Arts Council. (websites listed below)

How Consensus Works:

There are many variations on consensus decision-making, some of which are described in the resources listed below. If you are considering the use of consensus decision-making, you will find a wealth of other information online by using a search engine. This will be very helpful, but keep in mind that some resources are better than others, and different groups will have different needs. The more you read, the more you will be able to discern patterns and determine what will work best for your group.

In most variations of consensus, there are three possible responses to a proposal:
1) **Consent:** expressing general agreement.
2) **Stand-aside**: expressing concerns or disagreement but also a willingness to yield to the desire of the group.
3) **Block:** expressing concerns that are serious enough to put one's own will over the will of the majority.

It is important to not use a block like you would a "no" vote; the sentiment attached to voting against a proposal is actually more like standing-aside from a consensus. Blocks should only be used in extreme circumstances, in which the decision is believed to endanger the organization or its participants, or violate the mission of the organization. It

is not enough that the proposal violates one's personal ethics (this might call for a stand aside, but not a block); it must also violate the collective ethics of the group. At the same time, if there are a large number of people standing aside, this by itself is reason to reconsider the proposal.

Much of the work of consensus happens before the meeting begins. You must build a foundation for consensus that allows everyone to understand the proposal and for concerns to be addressed, This foundation can be created through:

- **Solid proposals**, which take into account the group's history with the issue at hand.
- **Clear communication,** especially with those who you know might have concerns.
- **Focused discussion,** led by an experienced facilitator who is able to set aside her or his personal concerns about the issue at hand.

Concerns, especially those that might lead to a block, should be asked for and raised early in the discussion. When raising a concern, you should be as specific as possible, and indicate if it is a minor worry or a major problem that would lead you to block the proposal if not addressed. This way everyone can work together to generate solutions and amend the proposal if necessary.

Not every decision needs to be made by consensus, and if you try to reach consensus on every little decision, you will find that your meetings last for a very long time. It is helpful to keep in mind that the next step in setting up your organization should be the delegation of responsibilities. While some decisions are important enough to warrant a collective consensus, it is crucial that you not get bogged down in micromanagement. Some decisions are best delegated to individuals or committees.

Delegation is covered in detail in a related document, Cooperative Starter Series #5, "Creating Committee Charters."

For more information:
http://www.consensus.net
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Consensus_decision-making
"12 Myths of Consensus" by Betty Didcoct and Paul Delapa, in *Communities,* Winter 2006
Country Natural Beef: www.countrynaturalbeef.com
The Fremont Arts Council: www.fremontartscouncil.org