

Consensus Building

Quick consensus building technique

For those of you who have been on the losing end of a vote, you realize that even though you agreed to support the outcome, your heart just isn't in it and you may indeed be hard pressed to provide more than "lip service" to the results.

Consensus building is often a much quicker way to get people behind a decision. Remember, with this technique we're not talking about working with exceptionally serious or life and death types of conflicts. We are focused on the everyday types of decisions that would best be implemented if the team came to agreement by consensus rather than a vote.

Define Consensus

- Consensus means that the team (both parties, all sides), through the use of active listening, mutual respect, personal engagement, logic and reasonable accommodation in the give and take necessary for teamwork the group has come together in their decisions to develop a direction, set goals and action plans in a fashion that everyone can accept and support.
- Consensus *does not* mean passive acceptance without the ability to support the outcomes.
 - However, there may come a time when circumstances beyond your control put a teammate in a position in which they indicate they can accept but not openly support the team's decision, then work toward getting an agreement not to block the decision.
- Consensus *does not* mean a vote was taken and the majority rules.

Scenario: You've just completed orchestrating a brainstorming session in which several ideas came up on how to accomplish some task or another. What you want now, is a consensus on which idea and perhaps backup idea to select and implement. You want to use consensus to make sure you have everyone's support.

Instructions

1. **Define what consensus means** and what it does not mean.
2. **Explain that each person is to list the ideas in order of priority** that they would like to see implement.
3. They will be asked in turn to **provide their "logic" or "reasoning"** for their selections.
 - Emphasize that this is **not a good time to mount an emotional defense** of an individual's preferences. That is counter-productive and will stop the consensus building process dead in its tracks. Focus on non-emotional LOGIC only. Keep the emotions off the table.

4. Everyone is to **listen carefully to the logic** provided and amend their choices based on what they hear.
5. One or two **clarifying questions** to ensure that you heard correctly are okay
 - **WARNING:** Know that a clarifying question starting with the word "why" will often cause a person to feel challenged and then become defensive. Consequently this will attach the defense emotion to the idea or belief which then begins to form as a conviction or attitude both of which are increasingly resistant to change. If an emotion is triggered use the defusing anger: 1) Recognize the emotion – Name it. 2) Show caring by listening and perhaps offering a “no-fault” apology. 3) Engage in a problem solving process. Remember, asking questions to clarify what you’re hearing are okay, but don’t allow what you’re hearing to be challenged.
6. **Allow the process to unfold** during each round of listing priorities and presenting logic.
7. **Each person should now re-order their lists** based on the logic that influenced their thinking.
8. **Once again**, each person in turn will **provide their sequence and logic**.
9. **Repeat the process a third time** if you feel everyone is coming together to confirm consensus has been reached.

Troubleshooting

On occasion, you will have someone or some group invested in an idea or sequence of ideas and logic alone doesn't seem to be persuading them. This usually indicates one or more of three things:

1. Emotions are attached to the list sequence.
 - Fix by having the parties use the "Defending Opposing Viewpoints" strategy outlined below
2. A strong ego or dominant personality characteristic is present.
 - When you first notice this happening re-emphasize the give and take needed in a teamwork effort - secondarily use the "Defending Opposing Viewpoints" strategy below.
3. The person has special interests influencing ability to reach consensus
 - During break, identify the special interest... usually tied to job performance, money, bringing home the prize (ego), fear of retaliation from peers if compromise is needed.
 - Use the "Defending Opposing Viewpoints" strategy below.
 - Add this information to your "set up" instructions and guidelines for future sessions

Defending Opposing Viewpoints - technique

1. Each person favoring a particular idea will be asked to **champion and “defend” the opposing or different view or idea** (role reversal). If there are groups, then

they can be teamed together. Try to keep the numbers in the 3 to 5 people per group range.

- Notice because they will be asked to create logic that is aligned with a view that is different from their own, the internal conflict people will feel is going to automatically trigger low level emotions. You want this to happen so that they will begin to balance out the opposing emotionally filtered logic. When this happens, and you will sense the shift. Make sure both sides get to present and then you can wind it down and return to conducting another round of listing with logic.
2. Discussion can include mounting the best rationale for another person's point of view while they mount the best rationale for your point of view
 3. Now after the teams are finished, repeat the process with each person stating their priorities and reasoning as before.

NOTES:

- This technique gains its **effectiveness by getting the person to deliberately attach positive emotions** to an idea that they previously had negative emotions attached. Whichever idea has the most recent and strongest emotion attached will usually win. This technique is also effective for changing beliefs and attitudes.
- With experience you'll find that it is **uncommon to need a fourth go-round** and rare that a fifth go-round is necessary.
- When consensus on the issue is not possible within the time frame available **then get consensus a plan to move forward** which could mean anything from setting up a committee to get bring back additional information to listing the issue on a parking lot (flip chart style) to be address at another session. At least now you have consensus on how to proceed with the issue!