

The United Contract Attorneys has agreed to a modified consensus approach. There shall be two discussions and tests for consensus, and the facilitator shall make all efforts to help the group reach consensus. If, after two discussions, consensus cannot be reached, a vote shall be taken. New members shall be trained in consensus by more experienced members prior to the start of each meeting. Facilitators shall learn appropriate facilitation techniques to help the group reach consensus.

A Summary of Consensus, adapted from Gaia Education's Ecovillage Design Curriculum

"Consensus goes beyond majority rule. It replaces traditional styles of «top-down» leadership with a model of shared power and responsibility. A group, which uses consensus process effectively, can become a healthy community and a powerful force for social change"

- Beatrice

Briggs

Consensus is a decision-making process which strives for non-violent resolution of conflicts and the cooperative development of decisions that everyone can support.

Core belief: each person has an important piece of the truth. In order for consensus process to work, **five essential elements** must be in place:

- A willingness to share power
- Informed commitment to the consensus process
- A common purpose
- Strong agendas
- Effective facilitation

Ground Rules for Effective Groups

To help process, usually the facilitator presents these basic agreements as a proposal at the beginning of the group's first meeting - or at the first meeting in which they are to be used. Once they have been accepted by the group, it is the job of the facilitator to ensure the group respects these norms. Each group must choose the norms which best meet its needs and values.

Ground rules, adapted from Beatrice Briggs

- Use a facilitator
- Everyone participates, all are treated with respect and as equals
- Speak only for yourself, clearly and honestly, no personal attacks or blaming
- Seek a solution
- Begin and end on time, have an agenda and stick to it
- One speaker at a time, listen with respect and no interrupting
- Confidentiality (when appropriate)
- Silence = stand aside You have a responsibility to speak if you object or have an amendment. Everyone's participation, ideas, support and solidarity are critical.
- Alternate men and women speakers; immigrants, youth and/or minorities first, etc.
- No one speaks twice on a subject until everyone who wants to speak has had a turn

Agenda and Proposals

There are five basic steps which the facilitator must take with regard to each agenda item to help the group stay focused.

1. State the name of the item, whether it is for introduction, discussion or decision and how much time is allotted for it.
2. Turn the floor over to the sponsor of the item.
3. Facilitate the ensuing discussion.
4. Reach closure.
5. Check off the item on the written agenda and move on to the next.

Proposals, from 'Introduction to Consensus' handbook, by Beatrice Briggs.

A proposal is an expression of individual leadership and responsibility. It is the spark that ignites the fire of the consensus process in a non-hierarchical manner. A proposal consists of:

1. A statement clearly describing a course of action,
2. introduced by one or more members of the group
3. to focus and clarify the group's thinking on an issue,
4. discussed and modified as necessary
5. to lead to a decision which everyone can support
6. which is then recorded in the minutes of the meeting.

Contents of a Proposal

• **Title.** Brief and explicit. Should not contain the name of the sponsor. Example «Christmas Party Proposal» instead of «John's Proposal.» If it is a draft, and not the final proposal, put «DRAFT» and the date after the title.

- **Name(s)** of the sponsor(s)
- **Date** proposed.
- **Summary** of the principal ideas.
- **Background:** history, description of the existing situation, etc.
- **Justification/Goals:**
 - what the proposal is trying to accomplish
 - why the group should consider it now
- **Pros and Cons:** possible benefits of the proposal and possible drawbacks.
- **Alternatives** to the proposal (including taking no action).

Three Stages in the Decision-Making Process

In a strict consensus process, no votes are taken. Ideas or proposals are introduced, discussed, and revised as necessary, before reaching the point of decision. No significant issue may be introduced, discussed and decided in one meeting. If consensus is not reached, no action is taken. The intention is to non-violently resolve all concerns and conflicts surrounding a proposal so that everyone can support the decision.

1. Introduction: I propose... (to be done in a short time, weighing up the group interest, and giving up if there is no interest)

2. Discussion: I listen, ask, think about, feel, give my opinion, research, etc. (as much time as needed, perhaps in different meetings)

3. Decision: three options:

a. To block: I oppose the decision, because...

1. It is against my ethical principles
2. It is against group values and vision
3. It affects group security

b. To stand aside: I don't oppose, but don't support either. I don't take part in it.

c. To give consent: There may be small details I don't like. However, I support the decision and its implications.

Important!: A group working with consensus shouldn't accept any block for personal reasons. It is the work of the person blocking to explain why he or she is blocking and it is the work of the whole group to determine the validity of a given blocking. A person who needs to block continuously in a group should think seriously why he or she is in this group.

The Final Question: When finalizing a decision, the facilitator will ask: Are there any concerns or objections to this proposal? If there are none, the group has reached consensus!