

On Consensus

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For consensus to occur, a group must have the following:

Conflict management skills: In consensus building, conflict is considered desirable. It isn't avoided, dismissed, diminished or denied. Identifying, openly discussing and resolving conflict cooperatively and respectfully is viewed as part of the process that results in progress toward new understandings and toward change.

Openly acknowledged concerns: Through experience, I understand that meetings progress much more quickly when concerns remain unvoiced. However, it's also true that identifying and resolving concerns in advance of a decision helps ensure that a good decision is made and that successful implementation of the decision will follow more easily. Experience has also taught that many won't raise concerns. They fear the disapproval of their boss or peers. They fear being held responsible for extending the length of the meeting.

Acknowledgment of problems: Every organization has challenges and problems, both positive and negative. Those that recognize and acknowledge the problems are closer already to resolving the problems and improving the organization.

Self-empowerment: In consensus building, there is a stated requirement that every individual must speak up. Every member of the group is made aware that there is a responsibility to the group to participate fully in the process. This includes engaging in constructive conflict, voicing concerns and acknowledging problems. To do otherwise, Butler suggested, is to "delegate authority, intentionally or not," to others.

Questions: Participants in the consensus process are expected to continue questioning for clarity and understanding. Those engaged in the consensus process understand that one can't act on information that is not clear, understood or complete.

Listening skills: Though groups engaged in consensus generally welcome eloquent speakers, participants more fully welcome good listening skills.

Trust: "Neither approval nor friendship is necessary for a good working relationship; however, trust in one another is." This also includes acknowledgment and appreciation of personal and cultural differences.

Respect: In consensus decision-making, demonstrating respect is a requirement. Respect is demonstrated through active listening, by refusing to interrupt others and by taking the ideas of others seriously. There is never an occasion to show disrespect nor is disrespect tolerated by members of the group.

Unity of purpose: For the best interest of the organization to be served, individuals put the interest of the entire organization ahead of specialized interests. Decisions are made with regard to how the organization benefits. Turf building, departmental rifts and "we-they" divisions are abandoned in the interest of strengthening the entire organization. This may be the toughest requirement of all.

Consensus decision-making cannot happen without these prerequisites. That's started me on a new line of thought: an organization that is filled with individuals skilled in conflict management, in openly acknowledging concerns and problems, in self-empowerment, in questioning, in listening, with widespread trust, respect and unity of purpose. Even without the consensus, it would be one very impressive organization.

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