Rainbow Alliance & Inclusion Network Charter

Background:
The Rainbow Alliance & Inclusion Network, a Washington State Employee's Business Resource Group (RAIN BRG), established via Governor's Directive 16-11, is focused on advising and developing strategies for creating safe, diverse, and inclusive workplaces for our Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer/Questioning and other diverse sexual orientation, gender identity, and gender expression groups (LGBTQ+) employees, allies, and customers in Washington State.

Mission:
The BRG exists to help Washington State create safe and inclusive workplaces where every LGBTQ+ employee can bring their full authentic self to work, enabling them to do their best work every day for the people of Washington. The BRG will provide resources and support to employees and the stakeholders serviced by state agencies.

Purpose:

- Advise and develop strategies for creating safe, diverse, and inclusive workplaces for both our LGBTQ+ employees and our customers.
- Identify best practices for employers and employees within agencies and institutions.
- Support a safe place initiative for public-facing offices to connect with emergency and related services.
- Work with the Governor's Policy Office and Office of Financial Management to develop and maintain a statewide safe place program.

2018 Focus:

- Promote awareness of the BRG through building strong relationships within internal and external entities.
- Grow membership with a focus on inclusiveness from diverse populations.
- Continue the development of the structure of the BRG.
- Identify and develop a best practices process for the collection and dissemination of those practices to employees and employers.
- Begin work with the Governor's Policy Office and OFM to develop a statewide safe place program.
- Create a safe place initiative.

The Rainbow Alliance & Inclusion Network (RAIN), Washington State Employees' LGBTQ+ Business Resource Group (BRG) is an equal opportunity resource group. RAIN does not discriminate on the basis of age, sex, sexual orientation, gender, gender identity/expression, marital status, race, color, national origin, religion, creed, military status, veteran status, the presence of any sensory, mental or physical disability, or the use of a trained dog guide or service animal by a person with a disability.

We welcome all Washington state employees who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, or other diverse sexual orientation, gender identity and gender expression groups, and their allies. RAIN encourages all members to bring their authentic selves to the BRG.

We encourage all interested members to pursue BRG leadership opportunities as they arise.

The BRG is governed by a Charter that outlines the group's membership, operational processes, and scope of activities.

The BRG does not act as an alternative employment mechanism for addressing employee grievances and operates in alignment with all related bargaining agreements, rules, and laws.

I. Membership

A. The BRG, established via Governor's Directive 16-11, membership is open to state employees, with continuous supervisory approval, who are interested in assisting with the advising and developing of strategies for creating safe, diverse, and inclusive workplaces for our LGBTQ+ employees and customers.

B. Advisory Committee

i. The Advisory Committee consists of:

a. Chairs
b. Subcommittee chairs
c. Secretaries
d. Executive Sponsor
e. State Human Resources Representative(s)
f. Governor's Policy Office Representative

C. Active Members

i. State employees that regularly attends meetings, responds to communications and occasionally takes responsibility for tasks for the BRG. These members assist with the advising and developing of strategies for creating safe, diverse, and inclusive workplaces for our LGBTQ+ employees and customers. Active members will be asked to vote and provide input on various topics as needed. To vote for elected positions, a member must have joined the BRG no later than the month of May preceding the vote

D. Community at Large

i. Community at Large members are those individuals that are interested in occasionally participating and would like to receive communications and updates on the group's progress.

II. Roles

A. Executive Sponsor

i. Provides executive level guidance and leadership to members of the BRG.
ii. Acts as a champion for activities supported by the BRG by collaborating with other state agency leadership to foster their engagement and commitments of support.
iii. Assists the BRG to identify and capitalize on available resources to complete the BRG action plan and activities.

B. Elected Roles

i. Chairs

a. Develop and facilitate, in coordination with the Secretaries, all Advisory Committee meetings and BRG general meetings
b. Ensure timely completion of deliverables and elevate necessary matters to State HR
c. Act as representatives of the RAIN BRG to the Executive Sponsor, Governor's office, agency leadership, and others as needed.
d. Serve a 15 month term (3 month overlap with newly elected chairs).
e. See Appendix A for detailed information.

ii. Secretaries

a. Document and maintain all meeting notes and documentation related to the BRG.
b. Coordinate and facilitate, in coordination with the chairs, all Advisory Committee meetings and BRG general meetings.
c. Coordinate charter amendment proposals and subsequent changes to the charter for the October meetings
d. Schedule meeting space and disseminates information related to the BRG.
e. Maintain membership and attendance rosters.
f. Serve a one (1) year term.
g. See Appendix A for detailed information.

C. Elections Facilitator: Facilitates the election of BRG Chairs and Secretaries by accepting nominations, preparing all ballots, and providing oversight of the election process. Temporarily appointed by the Advisory Committee for the purposes of the election process. If all incumbents are running for a new term, the advisory committee will select an elections facilitator from the committee.

D. Advisory Committee

i. For the first two years the Advisory Committee consists of state employees that originally formed the Planning Committee for the RAIN BRG. Thereafter the committee will consist of Chairs, Subcommittee chairs, Secretaries, Executive Sponsor, State Human Resources Representative(s), Governor's Policy Office Representative. It is expected that these Advisory Committee members will:

a. Assist in setting the strategic direction for the BRG and champion their initiatives.
b. Attend all Advisory Committee meetings.
c. Attend all General Committee meetings.
d. Actively participate in BRG activities.
e. May be asked to act as an elections facilitator should circumstances require it.

E. Active Membership

i. The Active Membership consists of state employees that regularly attend as members of the BRG. It is expected that these members will:

a. Regularly attend general meetings.
b. Actively participate in BRG activities and/or subcommittees.
c. Report back to their individual agencies on the work of the BRG.
d. Report to the BRG on agency-level activities.
e. Support the mission of the BRG by being accessible to both the BRG and agency employees.
f. To vote for elected positions, a member must have joined the BRG no later than the month of May preceding the vote

ii. Costs related to the committees' role and actions relating to the BRG are covered by the individual's agency. This may include agency-approved travel, staff time, use of state resources, or other costs.

iii. BRG members will adhere to all applicable state rules, regulations, and policies at all BRG activities and events.

F. Community At Large

i. These members may, or may not be, state employees.
ii. These members will follow the guidelines applicable to state employees as established

by state rules, regulations, and policies.

iii. These members must be interested in promoting the values of the LGBTQ+ community and willing to participate in the activities of the BRG.

III. Nominations and Elections

A. Elected Officers are:

i. Chairs
ii. Secretaries

B. Step-by-step nomination process:

i. April / May – In the monthly BRG meeting announce that we are approaching election time of year. Current Chairs and Secretaries will present an overview of what each position entails (see Appendix A). Current Chairs and Secretaries will offer to meet with interested parties, one-on-one or in a group to discuss and answer questions regarding their positions. Offer time either during the meeting or after the meeting.
ii. June – Request nominations for the Chair and Secretaries positions from active members.
iii. July – Any active members of the BRG may submit nominations for the elected officer positions to the Elections Facilitator. The Elections Facilitator is the Chair and/or Secretary that isn't currently running for office. The Elections Facilitator with at least one other active member of the BRG, will compile the list of nominees the last week of July and will contact them to determine if they are interested in running for the position they were nominated for. The nominee must communicate with their supervisor to ensure support for accepting a leadership position in the BRG. If so, ask for them to compose some information about themselves and their interest in the position they were nominated for.
    1. Active is defined as being a state employee that regularly attends meetings, responds to communications and occasionally takes responsibility for tasks for the BRG. To vote for elected positions, a member must have joined the BRG no later than the month of May preceding the vote.
iv. August – Share the names of the persons nominated, the information about the candidates and what positions they are running for with the BRG and allow time on the August BRG Agenda to "Meet the Candidates". Allow time for the candidates to meet the group and share some information about themselves with the group.

C. Terms:

i. For Chairs and Secretaries are from October – December, a 15 month term (3 month overlap with new and newly elected Chairs / Secretaries).
    1. October –December creates the time needed to facilitate a smooth transition from incumbents to the newly elected chairs and secretaries.
    2. See Appendix B describing the transition plan.
ii. Unexpected vacancies - If a Chair or Secretary position becomes vacant before the end of the term the Advisory Committee may appoint a member of the active membership into a vacant elected officer position, subject to the approval of the Active Membership.

D. The Advisory Committee reserves the right to make determinations/edits to the timeline and nominations process.

IV. Voting

A. Elections:

i. During the month of September, Survey Monkey (or other similar platform) will be used as a

voting mechanism using the list generated by the Elections Facilitator.

ii. Active members of the RAIN BRG are voting members.

    a. Active is defined as being a state employee that regularly attends meetings, responds to communications and occasionally takes responsibility for tasks for the BRG. To vote for elected positions, a member must have joined the BRG no later than the month of May preceding the vote.
    b. Newly elected Chair / Secretary will be announced at the October BRG meeting.

iii. Other matters needing a vote.

    a. Voting is based on the consensus model as described in Appendix C.

V. Subcommittees

A. Safe Places

i. This initial action committee is a direct result of Governor's Directive 16.11, directing the BRG to work with the Policy Office and OFM to develop a state program similar to the Seattle Police Department "Safe Place" program.
ii. The committee will develop an implementation plan to submit to the Governor's office taking into consideration all of the factors/implications that become apparent during their research and planning.

B. Best Practices

i. This initial action committee is a direct result of Governor's Directive 16.11, directing the BRG to work with OFM State HR, agencies, and institutions to identify and share best practices.
ii. The committee will develop a process for gathering best practices (and ensuring those practices are truly "best") and disseminating those practices to state agencies.

C. Outreach

i. The purpose of the Outreach and Communications Subcommittee is to promote visibility through:

    a. Outreach Activities
    b. Education and training

D. Communications

i. The purpose of the Communications Subcommittee is to promote visibility through the use of communications strategies to include but not limited to:

    a. Creation and publication of the RAIN Newsletter
    b. Creation and maintenance of internally and externally (in coordination with the Governor's office) facing websites
    c. IT support
    d. Creating, editing, or vetting content to be distributed to RAIN members, state employees and the public

VI. Ad Hoc Subcommittees

A. Development of future committees will be contingent on the needs of the RAIN BRG members and agencies. Possibilities include but are not limited to:

i. Recruitment
ii. Retention
iii. Engagement
iv. Mentoring
v. Career/Professional Development
vi. Recognition
vii. Work Environment
viii. Community Involvement
ix. Resources

VII. Meetings

A. BRG General Committee

i. Meetings will be held from 2-5pm on the third Thursday of every month and is subject to change with prior notification due to unforeseen logistical difficulties.
ii. In the month of October, an annual meeting of the BRG will be held. Items on the agenda for this meeting will include:

a. Presentation of the annual report.
b. Any updates and adoption of any changes to the Charter.

B. Subcommittees

i. Time will be allotted for subcommittees to meet during the BRG general meeting. However, all standing subcommittees may meet independently from the general committee meetings if necessary to meet a specific business need.

VIII. Action Plan

A. Each year, the BRG Secretaries will work with the leads for the subcommittees and the Advisory Committee in generating the action plan. The plan will include the following:

i. A list of planned activities in support of the charter and by-laws, to include the focus of each subcommittee.
ii. Methods to measure the success and/or performance of each activity.
iii. Measurable goals that will be tracked and reported in the annual report.

B. The action plan will be reviewed by the Advisory Committee during the January meeting.

IX. Amendments to the Charter

A. Any active member of the BRG may propose an amendment to the Charter.
B. All proposed amendments must be submitted in writing to the Advisory Committee.
C. Proposed amendments must be publicized to the membership in advance of the meeting at which the amendment is to be discussed.
D. Proposed amendments require a consensus vote from the meeting membership on the day it is being addressed in order to be adopted.
E. Typically takes place once per year, however, urgent matters will be addressed on a case by case basis.

X. Staffing/Operational Costs – THIS SECTION WILL MATCH ALL OTHER BRG WORDING

A. At this time, costs for all BRG activities will be absorbed by the supporting agencies.

B. Costs may include, but are not limited to, de minimis use of state resources, as approved by each executive committee member's agencies, to include:

i. Email
ii. Meeting rooms
iii. Transportation
iv. Presentation or handout materials
v. Staff resource time
vi. Development and delivery of training

C. Support for other BRG activities such as data collection, hosting an BRG information web site, records storage, or other costs may be funded by the supporting agencies.

Appendix A: Advisory Board Roles and Responsibilities

Chairs

- Develop and facilitate, in coordination with Admin Liaisons, all meetings of the Advisory Committee and BRG General Meetings.
    - Attend all general membership, and Advisory Committee meetings
    - Facilitate all General Membership and Advisory Committee meetings
    - Work with all BRG elected members to ensure coverage at all meetings, and when emergencies occur
- Ensure timely completion of deliverables, in coordination with Admin Liaisons and Advisory Committee, and elevate necessary matters to State HR
    - Responsible for timely submission of RAIN deliverables to appropriate leadership (OFM-SHR, Executive Sponsor, etc.) representative, as determined at the onset of project.
- Act as representatives of the BRG to the Executive Sponsor, State HR, agency leadership, and others as needed.
- Serve a 15 month term (3 month overlap with newly elected chairs)

Administrative Liaisons

- Document and maintain all meeting notes and documentation related to the BRG
    - This includes responsibility for the coordination and/or upkeep of SharePoint site.
- Coordinate and facilitate, in coordination with the Chairs, General Membership and Advisory Committee meetings
    - Work with all BRG elected members to ensure coverage at all meetings, and when emergencies occur
- Disseminate agendas for general membership and advisory committee meetings at least 7-10 days in advance of both meetings.
- Ensure timely completion of deliverables, in coordination with chairs and advisory committee, and elevate necessary matters to State HR.
    - Responsible for timely submission of RAIN deliverables to appropriate leadership (OFM-SHR, Executive Sponsor, etc.) representative, as determined at the onset of project.
- Act as representatives of the BRG to the Executive Sponsor, State HR, agency leadership, and others as needed.
- Serve a 15 month term (3 month overlap with newly elected admin liaisons).

There are also various opportunities to participate in additional activities, as RAIN representatives, across the State. These additional opportunities are not required, and participation is contingent on supervisor approval. Things that fall into this category are:

- Attend and/or present at ad hoc agency or enterprise-wide workgroups, trainings, and conferences related to statewide initiatives and programs in alignment with RAIN activities.

- Attend RAIN sponsored events and events where RAIN has a presence such as Capital City Pride, Public Service Recognition Week, the annual Pride Flag raising ceremony on Capital Campus, etc. Participation in non-state government activities may require the use of personal leave.

Appendix B – Transition Plan (Currently being developed)

Consensus

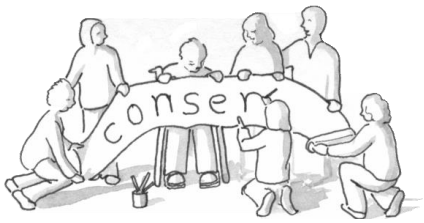
Decision Making

In this consensus briefing:

Consensus decision making is a creative and dynamic way of reaching agreement between all members of a group. Instead of simply voting for an item and having the majority of the group getting their way, a group using consensus is committed to finding solutions that everyone actively supports, or at least can live with. This ensures that all opinions, ideas and concerns are taken into account. Through listening closely to each other, the group aims to come up with proposals that work for everyone. Consensus is neither compromise nor unanimity – it aims to go further by weaving together everyone's best ideas and key concerns – a process that often results in surprising and creative solutions, inspiring both the individual and the group as whole.

Consensus can work in all types of settings – small groups, local communities, businesses, even whole nations and territories. The exact process may differ depending on the size of the group and other factors, but the basic principles are the same.

In the following briefing you'll find lots of useful information, not only about the basics of consensus decision making, but also about how to apply it to large groups of people and about ideas for dealing with common problems. We also have a *Short Guide to Consensus* and you can find lots of tips on how to make your consensus meetings run smoothly in our guides to *Facilitating Meetings*.



What's wrong with the democracy we've got?

How we make decisions is the key to how our society is organised. It influences every aspect of our lives including our places of work, local communities, health services, and even whether we live in war or peace.

Many of us have been brought up to believe that the western-style system of voting is the highest form of democracy. Yet in the very nations which shout loudest about the virtues of democracy, many people don't even bother to vote any more; they feel it doesn't actually make any difference to their lives as most decisions are made by an elite of powerful politicians and business people.

Representative democracies

Power and decision making is taken away from ordinary people when they vote for leaders – handing over power to make decisions to a small elite with completely different interests from their own. Being allowed to vote 20 times in a lifetime for an MP or senator is a poor substitute for having the power ourselves to make the decisions that affect every aspect of our lives.

In any case, there are many areas of society where democratic principles have little influence. Most institutions and work places are entirely hierarchical – students

and employees don't usually get a chance to vote their superiors into office or have any decision making power in the places where they spend the greatest part of their lives. Or consider the supermarket chain muscling its way into a town against the will of local people. Most areas of society are ruled by power, status and money, not through democracy.

What's wrong with voting?

Compared to this, working in a small group where everyone votes directly on important issues may feel like having democratic control. However, voting creates a majority and a minority – a situation in which there are winners and losers. If most people support an idea then it will be voted in, and the concerns of the people who opposed it can be ignored. This situation can foster conflict and distrust as the 'losers' feel disempowered by the process. The will of the majority is seen as the will of the whole group, with the minority expected to accept and carry out the decision, even if it is against their deeply held convictions and most basic needs. A majority will find it easy to steamroll an idea over a dissenting minority rather than looking for another solution that would suit all. People might sometimes *choose* to bow to the will of the majority, but, in a voting system, when people constantly find themselves in a minority they lose control over their own lives. A vivid example is the imprisonment, in many European 'demo- cracies', of those refusing military service.

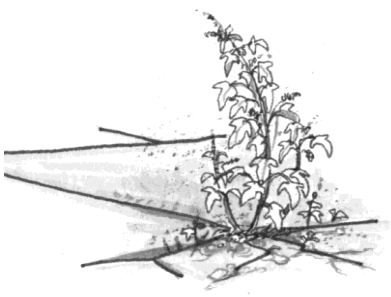
It's true that majority voting enables even controversial decisions to be taken in a minimum amount of time, but that doesn't mean to say that this decision will be a wise one, or even morally acceptable. After all, at one time, the majority of Europeans and North Americans supported the 'right' to hold slaves.

The alternatives are already here

"We have these moments of non-capitalist, non-coercive, non-hierarchical interaction in our lives constantly, and these are the times when we most enjoy the company of others, when we get the most out of other people; but somehow it doesn't occur to us to demand that our society work this way." CrimethInc

Many people accept the idea that voting is the 'normal' way of having democratic control over the decisions that affect us – after all, it is often presented to us as the only possibility out there. However, a rejection of voting is nothing new. Many people struggling for social change have recognised that changing the way we make decisions is key to creating a different society. If we are fighting for a better society where everyone has control over their own life, where everyone has equal access to power, where it's possible for everyone to follow their interests and fulfil their needs, then we need to develop alternative processes for making decisions; processes that recognise everyone's right to self-determination, that encourage mutual aid and replace competition with co-operation.

The alternatives to the current system are already here, growing in the gaps between the paving stones of state authority and corporate control. We only need to learn to recognise them for the seed- lings of the different kind of society that they are. Homeless people occupying empty houses and turning them into collective homes, workers buying out the businesses they work for and running them on equitable terms, gardening groups growing vegetables collectively; once we start looking there are hundreds of examples of co-operative organising that we encounter in our daily lives. Many of these organise through varying forms of consensus decision making.



Why use consensus?

No one is more qualified than you to decide what your life will be.

Consensus decision making is based on the idea that people should have full control over their lives and that power should be shared by all rather than concentrated in the hands of a few. It implies wide-ranging liberty, including the freedom to decide one's own course in life and the right to play an equal role in forging a common future.

As well as wanting to enjoy as much freedom as possible, most of us wish to live in, and are dependent on, some form of society. This means finding ways to balance the needs and desires of every individual with those of the closer community and the wider world.

Consensus decision making aims to provide a way of doing this. It builds on respect, trust, co-operation and mutual aid to achieve agreeable solutions for everyone concerned.

At the heart of consensus is a respectful dialogue between equals. It's about helping groups to work together to meet both the individual's and the group's needs. It's about how to work *with* each other rather than *for* or *against* each other, something that requires openness and trust. Consensus is looking for 'win-win' solutions that are acceptable to all, with the direct benefit that everyone agrees with the final decision, resulting in a greater commitment to actually turning it into reality.

In consensus every person has the power to make changes in the group they are working in – and to prevent changes they find unacceptable. The right to block a decision means that minor- ities cannot just be ignored, but solutions will have to be found to deal with their concerns. No decision will be made against the will of an indi- vidual or a minority, instead the group constantly adapts to all its member's needs.

Consensus is about active participation and sharing power equally. This makes it a powerful tool not only for empowering individuals, but also for bringing people together and building communities.

Who uses consensus?

Consensus is not a new idea. Variations of consensus have been tested and proven around the world and through time.

On the American continent non-hierarchical societies have existed for hundreds of years. Before 1600, five nations – the Cayuga, Mohawk, Oneida, Onondaga, and Seneca – formed the **Haudenosaunee Confederation**, which works on a consensual basis and is still in existence today.

There are also many examples of successful and stable utopian communes using consensus decision making such as the Christian **Herrnhüter** settlement 1741-1760 and the production commune **Boimondeau** in France 1941-1972.

Christiania, an autonomous district in the city of Copenhagen has been self-governed by its inhabitants since 1971.

Within the **co-operative movement** many housing co-ops and social enterprises use consensus successfully: prominent examples include Green City, a wholefood wholesaler based in Scotland; and Radical Routes, a network of housing co-ops and workers' co-ops in the UK.

The business meetings of the **Religious Society of Friends (Quakers)** use consensus to integrate the insights of each individual, arriving at the best possible approximation of the Truth.

Political and social activists such as many **anarchists** and others working for peace, the environment and social justice commonly regard consensus to be essential to their work. They believe that the methods for achieving change need to match their goals and visions of a free, nonviolent, egalitarian society. In protests around the world many **mass actions** and **protest camps** involving several thousand people have been organised and carried out using consensus, including the 1999 'Battle of Seattle' World Trade Organisation protest, the 2005 G8 summit protests in Scotland and the Camps for Climate Action in the UK, Germany, Australia, Netherlands and other countries.

Conditions for consensus

Different groups use slightly different processes to achieve consensus decisions. However, in every group, there are a few conditions that underpin consensus building.

Common Goal: *everyone present at the meeting needs to share a common goal and be willing to work together towards it.* This could be the desire to take action at a specific event, or a shared vision of a better world. Don't just assume everyone is pulling in the same direction – spend time together defining the goals of your group and the way you can get there. If differences arise in later meetings, revisiting the common goal can help to focus and unite the group.

Commitment to reach consensus: *consensus can require a lot of commitment and patience to make it work.* Everyone must be willing to really give it a go. This means not only being deeply honest about what it is you want or don't want but also able to properly listen to what others have to say. Everyone must be willing to shift their positions, to be open to alternative solu- tions and be able to reassess what they consider to be their needs. It would be easy to call for a vote at the first sign of difficulty, but in the consensus model, differences help to build a stronger and more creative final decision. Diffi- culties can arise if individuals secretly want to return to majority voting, just waiting for the chance to say "I told you it wouldn't work."

Trust and openness: *we all need to be able to trust that everyone shares our commitment to creating true consensus decisions.* This includes being able to trust people not to abuse the process or to manipulate the outcome of the discussion. If we're scared that other people are putting their own wishes and needs before everyone else's then we're more likely to become defensive, and behave in the same way ourselves because it seems to be the only way to look after our own interests.

Making decisions by consensus is based on open- ness – this means learning to openly express both our desires (what we'd *like* to see happening), and our needs (what we *have* to see happen in order to support a decision). It takes time for us to learn how to distinguish between our wants and needs – after all most of us are more used to decision making where one wins and the other loses. In this kind of adversarial system we are often forced to claim we need more than we really do so we can concede points without giving up any significant ground. But if everyone is able to talk openly then the group will have the information it requires to take everyone's positions into account and to come up with a solution that everyone can support.

Sufficient time *for making decisions and for learning to work by consensus.* Taking time to make a good decision now can save wasting time revisiting a bad one later.

Clear Process: *it's essential for everyone to have a shared understanding of the process that the meeting is using.* There are lots of variations of the consensus process, so even if people are experienced in using consensus they may use it differently to you! There may also be group agreements or hand signals in use that need to be explained.

Active participation: *if we want a decision we can all agree on then we all need to play an active role in the decision making.* This means listening to what everyone has to say, voicing thoughts and feelings about the matter and pro-actively looking for solutions that include everyone.

Good facilitation: *When your group is larger than just a handful of people or you are trying to make difficult decisions, appoint facilitators* to help your meeting run more smoothly. Good facilitation helps the group to work harmoni- ously, creatively and democratically. It also ensures that the tasks of the meeting get done, that decisions are made and implemented. If, in a small group, you don't give one person the role of facilitator, then everyone can be responsible for facilitation. If you do appoint facilitators, they need active support from everyone present.

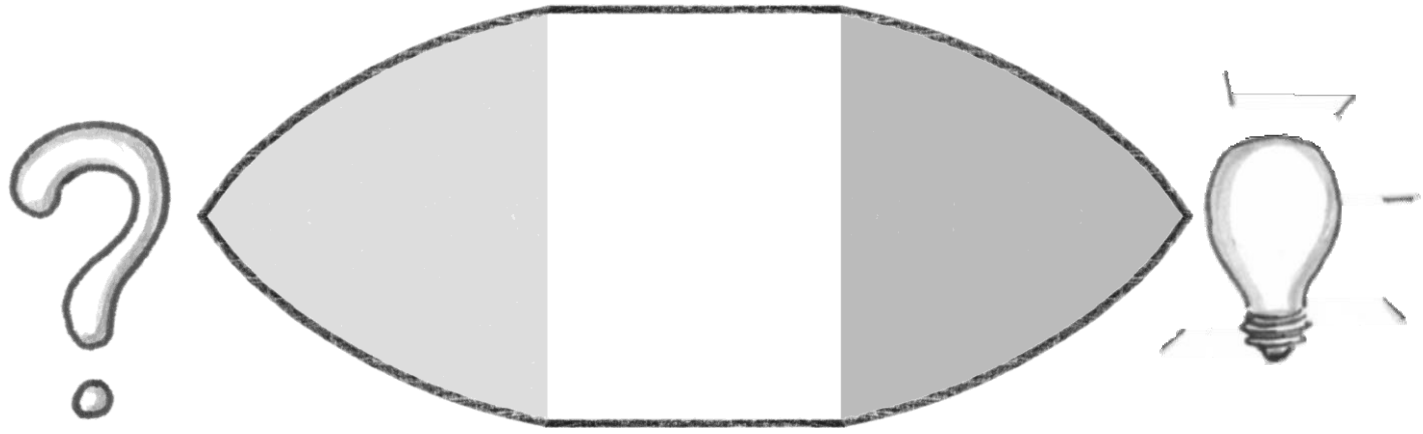
All of the conditions talked about above can be gained or improved over time – so if your group isn't meeting all the conditions at the moment you don't have to give up! For example, if you haven't agreed on your common goal use consensus to decide on one that everyone can subscribe to; or if your group's facilitation skills aren't too good then use any opportunities to practice; read our facilitation briefings or attend a training.

The consensus process (for small and medium sized groups)

The key for a group working towards consensus is for all members of the group express their needs and viewpoints clearly, recognise their common ground and find solutions to any areas of disagreement.

The diagram below shows how a discussion evolves during the consensus process. At the beginning it widens out as people bring different perspectives and ideas to the group. This provides the material needed for a broad ranging discussion (the middle section) which explores all the options and helps people understand each others' concerns. This can be a turbulent and sometimes difficult stage – people might be grappling with lots of competing or contradictory ideas – but it is the most creative part, so don't lose heart!

Finally the group finds common ground and weeds out some of the options, combining all the useful bits into a proposal. The third stage in the diagram shows this convergence of the discussion, culminating in the decision.



Opening out Share needs, concerns, desires and emotions.

Generate ideas.

Discussion
Explore ideas and pros and cons.

Try to understand each other's needs and concerns.

Synthesis
Find common ground and build proposals by weaving together different ideas.

Proposals need to address fundamental needs and key concerns.

The stages of the consensus process

There are lots of consensus models out there, some groups have developed very detailed procedures, other groups follow a more organic process. The following basic process outlines the stages that are common to most models of consensus. Although your group may not formally go through the process for each and every decision you make it's a good idea to regularly practise doing it in this way. Being familiar with the process can really help when it comes to difficult or complex decisions.

This model will work well in groups up to about 15-20 people. With groups larger than that extra steps need to be built in to ensure that everyone is able to participate fully. Have a look at the section on *Consensus in large groups* below to see how this basic model can be adapted to work for groups of hundreds and even thousands of people.

Step 1: **Introduce and clarify the issue(s) to be decided**

Share relevant information. Work out what the key questions are.

Step 2: **Explore the issue and look for ideas**

1. Gather initial thoughts and reactions. What are the **issues** and **concerns**?
2. Collect **ideas** for solving the problem – write them down.
3. Have a **broad ranging discussion** and debate the ideas:

- What are the pros and cons?
- Start to think about solutions to the concerns.
- Eliminate some ideas, short list others.

Step 3: **Look for emerging proposals**

Is there one idea, or a series of ideas, that brings together the best qualities of the ideas discussed? Look for a solution that everyone might agree on and create a proposal.

Step 4: **Discuss, clarify and amend your proposal**

Ensure that any remaining concerns are heard and that everyone has a chance to

Look for **amendments** that make the proposal even more acceptable to the group

Step 5: **Test for agreement**

Do you have agreement? Check for the following:

Blocks: I have a fundamental disagreement with the core of the proposal that cannot be resolved. We need to look for a new

Stand asides: I can't support this proposal because ... but I don't want to stop the group, so I'll let the decision happen without

Reservations: I have some reservations but am willing to let the proposal pass.

Agreement: I support the proposal and am willing to help implement it.

Consensus: No blocks, not too many stand asides or reservations? Active agreement?

Then we have a decision!

Step 6: **Implement the decision**

Who, when, how? Action point the various tasks, set deadlines etc.

Step 1: **Introduce and clarify the issue**

This first stage is crucial to get you off to a good start. A good introduction will focus the meeting, ensure that everyone is talking about the same issue and provide everyone with all relevant informa- tion needed to make a decision. Spending a bit more time now to get everyone up to speed will save lots of time later.

Explain what the issue is and why it needs to be discussed. This could be done by the facilit- ator, the person who is raising the issue or by someone who knows a lot about the issue and its background.

Share all relevant information. If possible prepare a summary of the relevant information and circulate in advance so that people have a chance to read up and think about the issue.

Agree the aims of the discussion: *What decisions need to be made by when? Who needs to be involved in making the decision? What are the key questions?* Can you break complex issues into smaller chunks to tackle one by one? Do all the decisions need to be made today? Does everyone need to be involved or can the issue be delegated to a working group? Could you decide the basics and leave the fine details to be worked out by a couple of people?

Allow plenty of time for questions and clari- fications. Don't assume that everything is crystal clear, just because it's obvious to you. Equally, if you are confused yourself, now is the time to ask for more information or explanations.

Step 2: **Explore the issue and look for ideas**

Now it's time for everyone to really try to understand the issue, to express what they want and need to happen and to come up with lots of ideas for solving the problems.

1. Gather initial thoughts and reactions. Start by giving people time to think about the issue and to express any wishes and concerns that it brings up. Make a note of these as they'll need to be addressed for a solution to be found. Resist the temptation to jump straight in with a proposal – to achieve consensus we first of all need to have a good understanding of everyone's concerns and limitations. Be honest about your own feelings and listen carefully to what everyone else is saying. At times it can be diffi- cult to say what it is you want and don't want so if you're struggling to express things say so rather than staying quiet. Equally, if you don't quite understand someone else's position, ask for clarification.

2. Collect ideas for solving the problem.
Use techniques such as go-rounds, ideastorms or breaking into small groups to generate lots of ideas for solving the problem. Be clear that at this stage they are only ideas, not proposals.
When bringing up ideas take into account the concerns you've heard. For example, if someone has said that they aren't able to get to a venue because of the poor transport links to that part of town, don't suggest another venue in the same area.

3. Have a broad ranging discussion about the ideas.
Consensus is a creative thinking process that thrives on mixing up lots of different ideas. Make time for a broad ranging discussion, where you can explore ideas and look at the pros and cons and any concerns they bring up. This will often spark new and surprising ideas. Express your reservations about ideas early on so that they can be dealt with. Draw on all the experience, knowledge and wisdom present in your group.
Make sure that everyone is heard.

Step 3: **Look for emerging proposals**

After discussing the issue freely move on to finding agreement on what needs to be done.

This stage is also called synthesis, which means coming up with a proposal by combining elements from several different ideas.

Start with a summary of where you think the group and its different members are at. Outline the emerging common ground as well as the unresolved differences: "It seems like we've almost reached agreement on that element, but we need to explore this part further to address everyone's concerns." It's important to not only pick up on clear differences, but also on more subtle agreement or disagreement.

Now **start building a proposal** from whatever agreement there is. Look for ideas on how the differences can be resolved. Focus on solutions that address the fundamental needs and key concerns that people within the group have.
Often people are willing to give way on some things but not on others which affect them more closely. The solution will often be found by combining elements from different proposals.

It can really help to **use a flipchart** or **a white-board** to write up the areas of agreement and issues to be resolved. This means everyone can see what's happening and it focusses the discus- sion.

People often argue over small details and over- look the fact that they agree on the big picture. Making this obvious to the group can help to provide ways forward.

Even when there is strong disagreement within the group, synthesis can help move the discus-sion on. Always try and find some common ground, no matter how small: "So we're all agreed that climate change demands urgent action, even if we disagree on whether the solu-tion lies in developing new technologies, or reducing consumption". This can reinforce that we're all on the same side, and remind a group of their overall shared aims – a necessary condi- tion for consensus.

Also synthesising a solution doesn't necessarily mean uniformity or unanimity. Sometimes a solution is staring us in the face, but our desire to get full agreement becomes an obstacle: "So we're all agreed we'd like to go ahead with the protest. However some feel strongly that the target of our protest should be government, and others feel it ought to be corporations – is there any reason why we have to choose between the two? Could we not agree that both can happen?"

Step 4: **Discuss, clarify and amend your proposal**

Check whether people have concerns about the proposal and look for amendments that make the proposal more acceptable to everyone. Do things like go-rounds and straw polls to gauge support for the proposal and to elicit amendments. If it becomes obvious at this stage that some people have strong reservations, see whether you can come up with a different, better option. Remember, consensus is about finding solutions that work for everyone. Be careful not to get carried away because most people like the proposal. Watch out for people who are quiet or looking unhappy and check with them. Give people time to get their head around the proposal and what it means for them. If it's a complex or emotional issue then build in some time for reflection or a break before moving on to testing for agreement.

Step 5: **Test for agreement**

1. **Clearly state the proposal:** it's best if people can see it written up, for example on a large piece of paper.

2. **Check for clarifications:** does everyone fully understand what is being proposed? Does everyone understand the same thing?

3. **Ask whether anyone has reservations or objections:** ideally the consensus decision making process should identify and address concerns and reservations at an early stage. However, proposals do not always get whole hearted support from everyone, and less confident group members may find it hard to express their disagreement. It is important therefore to explicitly check if anyone is unhappy with a proposal at this stage.

Within consensus there are several ways of expressing disagreement. The first two, declaring reservations and standing aside, provide a way to express concerns, whilst allowing the group to proceed with the decision. The block stops the proposal.

Declaring reservations: *I still have problems with the proposal, but I'll go along with it.*

You are willing to let the proposal pass but want to register your concerns. You may even put energy into implementing the idea once your dissent has been acknowledged. If there are significant reservations the group may amend or reword the proposal.

Standing aside: *I can't support this proposal because... but I don't want to stop the group, so I'll let the decision happen without me and I won't be part of implementing it.*

You might stand aside because you disagree with with the proposal: "*I'm unhappy enough with this decision not to put any effort into making it a reality, but if the rest of you want to go ahead, I won't stop you."* In this case the person standing aside is not responsible for the consequences.
This should be recorded in the minutes.

Sometimes standing aside can be more prag- matic. You might like the decision but be unable to support it because of time restraints or personal energy levels. "*I'm OK with the decision, but I'm not going to be around next week to make it happen."*

The group may be happy to accept the stand aside and go ahead. Or the group might decide to work on a new proposal, especially where there are several stand asides.

Blocking: *I have a fundamental disagreement with the core of the proposal that cannot be resolved. We need to look for a new proposal.*

A block always stops a proposal from being agreed. It expresses a fundamental objection. It means that you cannot live with the proposal. This isn't an "I don't really like it" or "I liked the other idea better." It means "I fundamentally object to this proposal, and here is why...!" **If the group accepts the proposal either you or others will struggle to stay part of the group.** The group can either accept the block and immediately look for another proposal, or look for amendments to overcome the objection.

The block is a powerful tool and should be used with caution. Ideally strong concerns will be heard early enough in the discussion to feed into in the synthesised proposal and a block will be unneces- sary.

Make sure that everyone understands the different options for expressing disagreement. Often people are confused and block when they would actually be happy to stand aside. Some- times people are scared of blocking even though they are deeply unhappy and use a milder form of disagreement instead. Ask people what their problems with the proposal are, and whether they have suggestions for how they could be addressed.

4. **Check for active agreement.**

If there are no blocks, check for active agreement from everyone. People often show they agree by waving their hands, but watch out for silence or inaction and check for the reasons.

Step 6: **Implement the decision**

Once you've agreed what you want to do, you need to work out who will do what and by when. Share out the tasks among the group and record these action points in the minutes for the meeting.

An example of a consensus process

Step 1: **Introduce and clarify issue**

"The bit of wasteland that we've used as a park for the last ten years is going to be sold by the council – they want to sell it so a supermarket can be built there!"

"But nobody wants another supermarket – we already have three in this town!"

Step 2: **Explore the issue and look for ideas**

"Let's go round and see what everyone thinks."

"I guess it's time to find somewhere else for the kids to play."

"I can't give up that easily – let's look for ways to raise the money to buy the park!" "Yeah, let's form an action group, do some fundraising, and what about squatting it?" "Mmm... not sure that squatting's for me. I'd be happy to look at raising money though." "OK, but I don't want to rule out taking action if we can't raise the money."

[More ideas are talked about...]

Step 3: **Look for emerging proposals**

"So what are we going to do? Some of you feel that we should build tree houses in the park to stop the developers, but we think we should try and raise money to buy the land."

"But nobody's said that they're actually against squatting the park – just not everyone wants to do it. And squatting might slow the council down so we have time to raise the money. Let's do both."

Step 4: **Discuss, clarify and amend your proposal**

"So let's just check how everyone feels about that as a proposal. Let's do a go-round."

"I like the idea of both squatting and trying to raise the cash to save the park, but people have been talking about separate groups doing those. I feel that we really need to stay as one group."

[Everyone has their say...]

"OK, so there's a suggestion that we amend the proposal to make it clear that we stay as one group, even though we're squatting and raising funds at the same time."

Step 5: **Test for agreement**

"Right, we have a proposal that we squat the park to make sure that it doesn't get trashed, and at the same time we start doing grant applications to raise money to buy the land. We're going to be clear that we are one group doing both these things. Does anyone disagree with this proposal? Remember, if you think we should consider any reservations you have then please let us know, even if you're still going to go along with it. And you can stand aside if you don't want to take part in all or part of the plans. Finally, the block is if you feel this is really wrong for some reason."

"Yes, I think squatting has good chances of getting results, but I'm not sure we can raise that much cash. I'm not going to stand in the way – so yeah, I'll stand aside from the grants bit."

"I don't believe we can manage the fundraising either, but I'm happy to give it a try."

"Does anyone else disagree? No? OK, I think we might have consensus. Let's just check – wave your hands if you agree with the proposal... Rob, just checking, because you didn't wave your hands – are you happy with the proposal? Ah, I see, yes... I hope your wrist gets better soon. Great, we have consensus, with one stand aside and one reservation!"

Step 6: **Implement the decision**

"OK, so we're going to squat the land and we need to start fundraising. We'll need to decide things like when we'll start squatting, and what things we'll need. And for the fundraising we'll need to identify funds that may be able to help, and come up with other ideas for raising money. And let's talk to people who couldn't come tonight and make sure they can get involved."

When do I use the block?

At the decision stage of the consensus process people have several options: to agree with the proposal (with or without reservations), to stand aside from the proposal but let the others proceed, or to block the proposal.

The option to block a proposal is based on the principle that no decision should be made against the will of a member of the group. It is an integral part of the consensus process. It means that a minority can't just be ignored, but solutions will have to be found that deal with their concerns. If a proposal is blocked, it means that the group can't move forward, and needs to come up with a different proposal that addresses the concerns that led to the block.

However, a big responsibility comes with the option to block. The block stops other people from doing something that they would like to do, therefore it is only appropriate to use it if major concerns about the proposal remain unresolved when it reaches decision stage. A person considering blocking needs to think carefully about whether standing aside from the decision – letting others in the group go ahead – would be enough.

Key skills for consensus

Active Listening: When we actively listen we suspend our own thought processes and give the speaker our full attention. We make a deliberate effort to understand someone's position and their underlying needs, concerns and emotions.

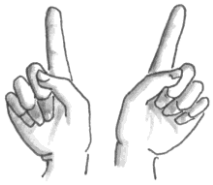
Summarising: A succinct and accurate summary of what's been said so far can be really helpful to move a group towards a decision. Outline the emerging common ground as well as the unresolved differences. Check with everyone that you've got it right.

Synthesis: Find the common ground, and any connections between seemingly competing ideas, and weave them together to form proposals. Focus on solutions that address the fundamental needs and key concerns within the group.

Handsignals

Handsignals can make meetings run more smoothly and help the facilitator see emerging agreements. The following three signals usually suffice:

Raise a hand when you wish to make a point.



Raise both hands if your point is a direct response to the current discussion. This allows you to jump to the head of the queue.

Silent applause when you hear an opinion that you agree with wave a hand with your fingers pointing upwards. This saves a lot of time as people don't need to chip in to verbally agree.

Guidelines for taking part in consensus decisions

 If you don't understand something, don't be afraid to say so.

 Be willing to work towards the solution that's best for everyone, not just what's best for you. Be flexible and willing to give something up to reach an agreement.

 Help to create a respectful and trusting atmosphere. Nobody should be afraid to express their ideas and opinions. Remember that we all have different values, backgrounds and behaviour and we get upset by different things.

 Explain your own position clearly. Be open and honest about the reasons for your view points. Express your concerns early on in the process so that they can be taken into account in any proposals.

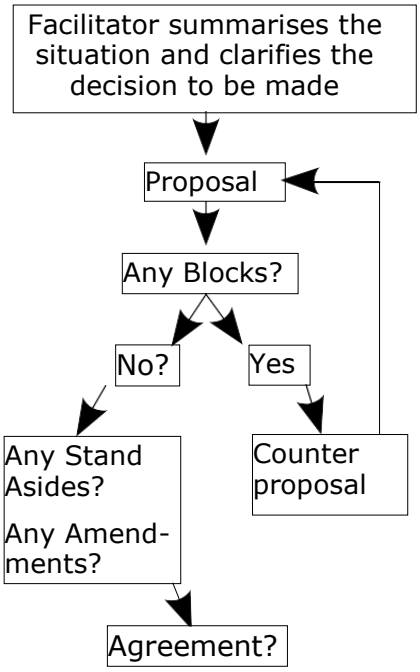
 Listen actively to what people are trying to say. Make a deliberate effort to understand someone's position and their underlying needs, concerns and emotions. Give everyone space to finish and take time to consider their point of view.

 Think before you speak, listen before you object. Listen to other members' reactions and consider them carefully before pressing your point. Self restraint is essential in consensus – sometimes the biggest obstacle to progress is an individual's attachment to one idea. If another proposal is good, don't complicate matters by opposing it just because it isn't your favourite idea! Ask yourself: "Does this idea work for the group, even if I don't like it the best?" or "Are all our ideas good enough? So does it matter which one we choose?".

 Don't be afraid of disagreement. Consensus isn't about everybody thinking the same thing. Differences of opinion are natural and to be expected. Disagreements can help a group's decision, because with a wide range of information and opinions, there is a greater chance the group will find suitable solutions. Easily reached consensus may cover up the fact that some people don't feel safe, or confident enough to express their disagreements.

Quick decision making

There are models for reaching a quick consensus that have been developed for fast moving situations such as actions and protests, where people only have a few minutes (at most) to come to a decision.



In quick consensus we are cutting short the discussion part and paring it down to just one workable proposal with amendments. This is because you are aiming to make the best decision *in the time you have.* This needs lots of practice in advance.

If you want to use this process, you'll need to discuss in advance the situations when you'll use it, and take time to explore the issues involved. That way you'll already know what people's concerns and reactions might be when confronted with the situation. In effect, this is like having the discussion stage of the consensus process in advance, which will allow you to jump straight to the proposal stage in an urgent situation.

How it works:

To save time appoint a facilitator in advance. The facilitator briefly states the situation.

Once you've clarified what decision needs to be made, move straight onto making *one* proposal. Don't try to come up with several options.
In some cases there may be time for discussion, but in others there won't be. Check whether anyone would block the proposal. If it is blocked, then make a new one straight away, rather than wasting time on the blocked one. If you hit upon a proposal that will work, then go with that.

Check for stand asides and, if you have time, make some friendly amendments. It is really important that people understand the difference between block and stand aside. A stand aside in quick consensus means "I won't do this", a block means "I don't want the group to do this".

A block kills a proposal – it's a total veto. In quick consensus people normally block either because a proposal will split the group (usually because some people have an ethical objection to it, or because it might endanger someone's safety) or the group is failing to make a decision.

A stand aside is agreeing to disagree. It allows the proposal to go ahead, but those that stand aside take no part in that action.

A friendly amendment enhances a proposal. It's not a new idea, but a way of making an existing one more effective.

Have a few practise runs in your group. Give yourselves a time limit to come to a decision on relevant scenarios such as the one below:

Step 1: **The facilitator briefly states the situation to make sure everyone is clear:**
"We've been given 2 minutes to move or we'll all be arrested."

Step 2: **The facilitator asks for proposals:**
"Any proposals?"

Step 3: **Someone makes a proposal:**
"Yeah, I propose we sit down and link arms".

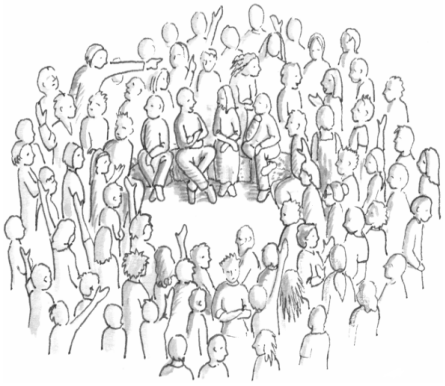
Step 4: **Facilitator restates the proposal, for clarity, and then tests for consensus:**
"OK, it's proposed that we sit in the road and link arms. Any blocks?"
"No"
"Any stand asides?"
"Yeah, I'll lose my job, I want to leave." "OK, anybody willing to go with Joe?" "Yes, I will."
"OK, we're agreed."

Step 5: **Make sure everyone knows who is doing what – and then get on and do it!**

Consensus in LargeGroups

Trying to find consensus in a large group brings its own challenges. But coming to consensus with hundreds or even thousands of people can be exhilarating and inspiring! Below you'll find lots of tips for making consensus work in large groups, including an outline of the spokescouncil.

Meeting the conditions for consensus in large groups



Extra care needs to be taken to ensure that the conditions for consensus are met – group members must share a common goal, be willing to build trust and be able to actively participate in a clear and well facilitated process.

Common Goal: whether it's a national campaigning network or a mass protest, you need to be clear why and to what extent you are working together.

Usually, a smaller founding group of people decide in advance what the overarching aims of the group will be and then invite people to participate on that basis. This way, you'll all be starting from a similar place. A written statement of the aims and workings of the group serves as a reminder and can be used to bring new members up to speed. Explain to new people what's already decided and what is still open to discussion. Run introductory sessions, where new people can find out what the group is all about and whether it's the right group for them.

Coalitions and alliances formed between pre-existing groups, for example to fight a specific issue, can find it difficult to reach consensus. Often the groups involved have different aims and some may not be committed to consensus, but are more interested in pushing their politics on everyone else.

Trust is more difficult to achieve in large groups as it's harder to get to know one another. Spend time discussing aims, people's politics and motivations. Build in a way for new people to get to know at least some of the people in the group quickly. Social time is important too. A clear decision making process will help people to trust that they will get heard and be respected in the final decision.

Time: large group meetings need extra time to enable adequate discussion and to allow people to express and hear all ideas. Cutting off discussion and forcing a decision will leave lots of people feeling disempowered and frustrated.

Clear process: large meetings need a lot of preparation and planning. A tight structure will be useful, however this can also be overly restrictive. Strike a balance between structure and open flow.

Make sure that everyone understands how the meeting will work, how decisions are made and how to participate. Run regular consensus workshops and explain the process at the beginning of every meeting. Use flipcharts to write up the consensus flowchart, the agenda, key points of the discussion and key decisions and put them up around the room so that everyone can see them.

Active participation: large meetings can easily be dominated by the confident few with less assertive or less experienced people finding it difficult to participate. Good facilitation and techniques such as splitting into small groups can help everyone to take a full part in the meeting.

Facilitation: you will need a facilitation team who all know exactly what job they are doing – someone to facilitate, someone to take hands, someone to write up notes on a flipchart, a time-keeper, a doorkeeper and someone to prepare refreshments.

Consensus processes for large groups

The six steps for reaching consensus are the same as for small groups, but some steps may happen with everyone together and other steps may happen in small groups to enable in-depth discussion and participation. Processes developed for large groups include delegation, large plenaries, splitting into smaller groups and the spokescouncil. Usually a combination of processes is needed for a smooth and successful large group meeting.

Delegation

You can save lots of time and frustration by delegating decisions. Avoid micro-management, where the whole group decides in fine detail what needs to be done. Make policy or framework decisions in the whole group and delegate the implementation and detail to working groups. Trust people to work in the spirit of the group and the agreements you've made, but also build in regular report backs so that the whole group is kept informed about the work sub groups are doing.

Large plenaries

Large group plenaries, where the whole group comes together in one place, can be used to share information, to make proposals and for final decision making.

However plenaries are much less useful for discussions that involve everyone as they tend to be dominated by a few confident people. There are also time constraints – giving everyone just 3 minutes to speak in a meeting of 200 people would take 10 hours! Plenaries are also limited by numbers – too large and people won't be able to hear, see each other or even fit into one room.

To increase participation you can limit the number of times a person can speak and give preference to women, new people etc. To help with clarity, summarise regularly and write up key words for everyone to see. Make sure everyone can hear each other (this might require a microphone - have a look at our guide on *Access Issues* for more tips).

Working in small groups

The advantages of splitting into small groups for discussion are that they create safer, more dynamic spaces to work in and include more people in a discussion. People will be much more comfortable talking openly in a small group of 6- 15 people. Working in small groups also saves time.

Working in small groups usually begins with the whole group starting to discuss the issue, highlighting problems and drawing up a list of possible ideas. Then people split into small groups to discuss the ideas and come up with more. You can either ask each group to explore all the ideas, or each group could take away just one idea to examine in depth. The small groups return to the main forum and report back, highlighting possible obstacles to each idea. If full group discussion cannot resolve the obstacles, small groups can go away to try to find ways to solve the problem.

Some people resist small group work. It requires trust to let other people go away and discuss an issue, and that trust isn't always present. Some people just like having a larger audience, others struggle to choose between working groups. To reassure people and to make sure that ideas and points don't get lost, it's important to have a well-functioning feedback process.

This process is still limited by size as it involves some plenary discussion.

The spokescouncil

The spokescouncil enables consensus decisions with hundreds and thousands of people, with the maximum number of opinions and ideas being heard in an efficient way. It is used by many groups such as social centres, workers' co-ops, peace and environmental movements.

In a spokescouncil (see flowchart below) the meeting breaks up into small groups, which start by discussing the issue(s) to come up with concerns and ideas. If a small group can reach agreement on a preferred proposal that can speed up the process, but it's not always possible.

Each group then sends their spoke (delegate) to the spokescouncil meeting to feed back their groups' ideas, concerns and proposals. The spokes look for one or more proposals that they think might be acceptable to all groups and take these back to their groups for discussion and amendments.

Each small group checks whether there is agreement, which is reported back to the spokescouncil by the spokes to check whether there is agreement by all, or if not to draw up

new proposals. The power to make decisions lies firmly with the small groups, not the spokes.

Small groups are often based around pre-ex- isting groups such as work teams, local groups or affinity groups. Alternatively, a large group of people might split into smaller groups just for the duration of one meeting, in which case groups can be created randomly, or by grouping people around something they have in common such as living in the same area or region.

The spoke: The spoke's role is to feed back information between the small group and the spokes meeting. The spoke needs to act as a voice for **everyone** within the small group, communicating the breadth of collective thought rather than their own personal point of view. Being the spoke carries a lot of responsibility to represent information accurately and to not manipulate the process.

Generally spokes do not make decisions for their group. They will always check back for agree- ment before a decision is finalised. However, an individual small group may empower their spoke to take decisions within agreed parameters.

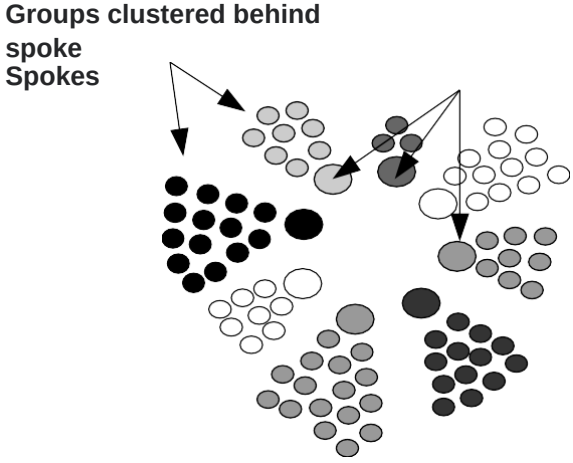
You might like to rotate the role from meeting to meeting, or agenda item to agenda item. It also helps to have two spokes, one of them presenting the viewpoints and proposals from their small group, the other to take notes of what other groups have to say. This helps to ensure that ideas don't get lost or misrepresented in the transmission between small groups and the spokescouncil.

The facilitation team: You'll need a team of at least four facilitators to keep an overview and help small groups and spokes when they get stuck, to synthesise proposals and to keep the meeting focused. You'll also need people to take minutes. For more read our briefing on *Facilit- ating Meetings*.

Time: Allow small groups enough time for discussion. If small groups struggle to come to an agreement within a reasonable time the spoke can feedback the whole breadth of opinion within the group.

Variations of a Spokescouncil

Fish bowl: To make the spokescouncil more accountable and reduce the need for repeating information, it can take place in the *fish bowl* format (see diagram), with the groups sitting in an outer circle around the spokes. Each group can sit directly behind their spoke, which makes it easier for the spoke to quickly check back with their group. Only the spokes should speak (except during small group discussion time).



Tiered spokescouncils: Even spokescouncil meetings are limited in size - when there are more than 30-40 spokes and small groups another tier might be needed.

In this case each spokescouncil sends a spoke to a second or even third level spokescouncil. With this number of people it becomes even more important to think carefully about which decisions actually need to be made by everyone and which can be left to individual groups. Tens of thousands people have successfully achieved consensus by having tiers of spokes meetings.
However, quite often the tiered spokescouncil can just act as a channel for information and consultation rather than being used for actual decision making.

Long-distance spokescouncils: The spokescouncil model also works for long-distance decision making. Rather than all members of all groups converging in one place to make a decision, groups can discuss the issue at home and then send a spoke to a meeting. The spokes come back with a proposal that the groups either accept or amend. To avoid time delay groups can be meeting in their home towns at the same time as all the spokes are meeting. The spokes ring or email proposals to the groups for discussion and feedback. Another option is that spokes talk to each other on the phone or via internet chat or email.

The stages of the consensus process for large groups

Discussions in the spokescouncil

Feedback through the spokes

Discussions and decisions in small groups

Step 1: **Introduce and clarify the issue(s) to be decided**

Share relevant information. Work out what the key questions are. This step can either happen with the whole group together or just with the spokes in the spokescouncil who then feed back to small groups.

Step 2: **Explore the issue and look for ideas**

1. Gather initial thoughts and reactions. What are the **issues** and **concerns**?
2. Collect **ideas** for solving the problem – write them down.
3. Have a **broad ranging discussion** and debate the ideas. What are the pros and cons?

Start to think about solutions to the concerns.

Eliminate some ideas, shortlist others.

Feedback ideas and concerns

Step 3: **Look for emerging proposals**

Is there one idea, or a series of ideas, that brings together the best qualities of what has been discussed? Look for a solution that everyone might agree on and create a proposal.

Feedback ideas, concerns and proposals from other groups

Step 4: **Discuss, clarify and amend proposals**

Taking into account all the other groups' positions as well as those within your own group. Ensure that any remaining concerns are heard and that everyone has a chance to contribute.

Look for **amendments** that make the proposals even more acceptable to the whole group.

Step 5: **Test for agreement**

Check for blocks, stand asides, reservations and active agreement.

Feedback position of each small group

Check if decision has been reached

No?

Yes?

Step 6 **Consensus! Implement the decision.**

Decide who will do what, when it needs to be done by, and if necessary, how it should be done.

Troubleshooting consensus

In troubleshooting consensus:

Like any method of decision making, consensus can work better in theory than in practise. However, most of the sticking points stem from lack of experience, or the fact that the conditions for consensus aren't being met, rather than there being a problem with consensus itself. It takes time to unlearn the patterns of behaviour we have been brought up to accept as the norm. Probably the most important thing to do is to take time and reflect on how your consensus process is going, giving each other feedback and constantly looking for ways to improve.

When things do get tricky in a meeting, it is important to get to the bottom of the underlying issues. Develop your ability to spot problems and the reasons behind them, and learn how to deal with them. There are a handful of really common problems, but there are many possible issues underlying them. The approach you take will depend on the cause of the problem. Don't just ask *What's happening?* Also ask *Why is it happening?* The more trust and understanding there is in a group the easier it is to overcome problems. Facilitation can help by supplying the tools to avoid problems in the first place and to deal with them creatively if they do occur.

Below we've compiled ideas for dealing with common issues in consensus based meetings.

Our meetings take a long time – how can we speed things up?

Reaching good consensus decisions can take longer than voting, especially when a group is new to it. It can take time to look at ideas until all objections are resolved, and some decisions might take more than one meeting to decide. The advantage of consensus is that decisions are usually of a higher standard. Consensus does get quicker with practise, particularly in a long-term group.

Save time in consensus by:

- making sure in advance that you have all the information you need at the meeting. If vital facts are missing, work out what needs to be done to get them for the next meeting and move on;
- delegating nitty-gritty business to working groups (e.g. publicity or fundraising);
- splitting the meeting into parallel working groups to deal with several issues at once – each working group comes back with a platter of proposals for the whole group to decide on;
- delegating a small group to synthesise everyone's ideas into a few possible solutions to be discussed later by the whole group;
- good facilitation – keep the group focussed and stop people from going off on tangents;
- keeping accurate minutes to avoid having to revisit decisions.

Urgent decisions

Time pressure to find a solution to an urgent problem leads to stress and group pressure 'to just get on with it'. When meetings run for a long time because a decision 'must be made today', many people will get tired, leaving only those with the most stamina to be involved in the final decision.

Allow enough time in the agenda to tackle urgent issues adequately. Postpone less urgent decisions, or allow them less time. Can the meeting be extended or continued another time? Could you find a temporary solution? Could a small group go away to discuss (and resolve) the issue?

Our meetings lack focus

A lack of focus can be very frustrating when you need to make decisions. To avoid this draw up an agenda that outlines what will be discussed in what order, and then stick to it. Appoint a facilitator to help the group to stay on topic and stop people from going off on tangents. If new issues come up in a discussion, acknowledge that they need discussing too, but separately. Make a note of them and schedule a time to discuss them.

What if we're stuck and can't reach a decision?

Do the conditions for consensus exist in your group?

Do you need to spend more time on devel- oping shared goals? Is everyone committed to working together to find a solution?

Does everyone understand how consensus works? Do you need to explain the process? Do you have good facilitator(s)?

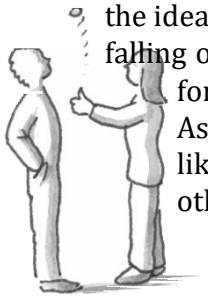
Do you have all the information you need to make a decision? If not, how can you get it?

Do you have a worthwhile decision to make? Where there's nothing to think about, flip a coin.

Is the group unable to reach a decision because it has no good choices? Are you forced to choose between being shot and hung? Can you create a situation where you can make real choices?

Have you had an honest discussion about where people are coming from?

Sometimes the group has not gone deep enough in their discussion. People may be holding back from being completely open about their concerns and motives, or they might find it difficult to express them.



Alternatively, it may be that someone hasn't been listened to carefully enough, and people are assuming they've understood when they haven't.

Encourage everyone to explain their viewpoints in more depth. What's at the root of people's worries? Which are the issues that are vital to address and which ones are side issues? Which areas does everyone agree on and what are the unresolved concerns?

Has the discussion become polar- ised?

Groups often get paralysed by individuals or factions holding strong conflicting positions. Remind yourselves that consensus is about co-operating to find solutions and not competing. Holding onto our personal agendas and opinions is often an obstacle to this co-operation happening. Encourage self-reflection. If the language of a discussion starts taking on tones of 'either /or', take a break and think of new ways forward. Can the ideas work together in any way? Are we falling out over small details and forgetting that we have a lot in common? Ask people to argue the point of view they like the least to help them understand the other side of the conflict.

Do you need to agree now or can you choose one of the options below?

Break down the decision into smaller bits. Are there any points on which you agree and can move forward? Can other areas be decided later?

Put the decision on ice, and come back to it in an hour, a day or a week. When people have a chance to cool off things can look quite different. At other times people might just be too tired to see a way forward – so a break or a cup of tea might help. If the decision is postponed try to engage conflicting parties in conflict resolution in the meantime.

Imagine what will happen in a year, or five years if you don't agree. How important is the decision now? A long term view can make people more willing to shift their positions.

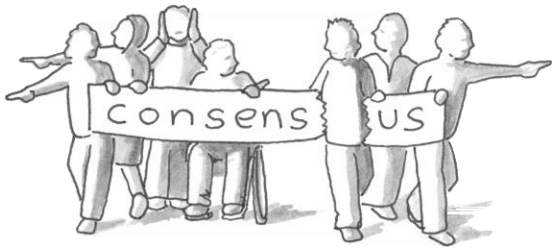
Agree an alternative process for taking a decision that all parties can sign up to. This could be allowing the person, or people, most affected to make the decision, putting all the possibilities into a hat and pulling one out, or tossing a coin. Some groups also have majority voting as a backup, often requiring an over- whelming vote such as 80% or 90% to make a decision valid. Be careful not to turn to this at the first sign of trouble – it's a definite last resort in a consensus group.

Do you need an outside facilitator to help you through your sticky patch?

Bringing in outside help needs to happen when there's enough good feeling left for people to co-operate with the process and be willing to accept a different facilitator. Quite often an outside facilitator will be seen as neutral, which can help things along.

Is it time to split the group?

If the same people continually find themselves at odds with the rest of the group, it may be time to think about the reasons for this. Is this really the right group to be in? Do all members of the group share the same goals, and is everyone committed to true consensus? You might need to spend some time exploring these issues.
Depending on the answers a group may ask members to leave or split into two groups. Although this might be painful, it will be better for everyone in the long run. Ideally, you'll carry on supporting each other and working together on shared projects.



Too many ideas?

Sometimes an issue brings up a large number of ideas. Pick a process that gives space to hear and consider each idea in turn. Which parts of it work, which don't work so well for the group? Can you pick elements from different ideas to create one combined 'super-proposal'? Are there any ideas that can be filtered out - for example, ideas that go against the aims of the group? Can some proposals be delegated to working groups for decision making?

Techniques for evaluating ideas:

Pros and Cons: list the benefits and drawbacks of each idea and compare the results. This can be done by the whole group or by splitting into small groups.

Plus-Minus-Implications: create a table with three columns entitled Plus, Minus, Implications. In the *Plus* column write down the positive aspects of the option, in the *Minus* the negative consequences, and put any other interesting or important effects in the *Implications* column.

Stickers and dots: for a quick prioritising exercise you can give everyone a number of stickers or dots (1-6 usually works). Ask people to stick their stickers by the issue or idea that they consider to be most important for the group to deal with.

Show of hands and Strawpolls: a quick way of gauging group opinion and identifying potential ways forward. Beware of using this as a short-cut to reaching a decision without a full discussion!

How can we deal with disruptive behaviour?

Do your meetings suffer from disruptive behaviour such as chatting, people coming late and leaving early, incessant joking, and going off on tangents? This could be a sign that people's needs in the meeting are not being fulfilled. We all bring a number of needs with us – we need to feel that we are being treated fairly, want our expertise and experience to be valued and our opinions to be heard.
When these needs aren't fulfilled people can easily feel alienated from the meeting. This often expresses itself in disruptive behaviour. For example, if someone feels they had no say in the choice of agenda they may not see the relevance of what is being discussed. Make sure everyone is able to participate and use facilitation tools to keep the meeting on track.

Alternatively the meeting might simply have gone on for too long, and people are tired and hungry and just need a break. It's also worth checking in with individuals as people's ability to sit still and focus varies. Build in breaks every 90 minutes and provide food and drinks for people to recharge.

Our group is dominated by a few individuals.

A common form of disruptive behaviour is when a handful of dominant personalities do most of the groups' talking and organising. The key to reducing dominating behaviour is to recognise that it is a two-way process. People can only dominate a group if others let them.

There are different kinds of dominating behaviour. Some people like power and will use their skills and experience to manipulate a group. This needs to be challenged openly. At other times, some people end up doing most of the work within a group, leading to more knowledge of the issues and more emotional investment. This means they can find themselves speaking a lot in meetings and dominating the discussions whether they like it or not. One of the best ways to deal with this is for every member of the group to do a fair share of the work, rather than letting one or two people do it all. That way information, skills, and effort are more equally distributed. Taking on more tasks should also enable quieter people in the group to have more confidence to speak up.

Whatever its causes, dominant behaviour can be discouraged, and other people's participation can be increased with the use of a few simple facilitation tools:

✓ Reaffirm the group's commitment to consensus decision making at the start of meetings.

✓ Gently remind dominant people that others also have valued opinions, and that meeting time is limited: "Thanks for that contribution.
It would be really nice to hear from anyone that's not yet had the chance to speak...."

✓ Set up a group agreement that includes agreements not to interrupt, and to allow everyone a chance to speak.

✓ Information is power – share information at the beginning of the meeting through presentations and question and answer sessions.

✓ Use go-rounds, small groups and paired listening to allow everyone to have a chance to speak.

✓ Use hand signals so that you can see who wants to speak, and prioritise those who haven't contributed so often.

✓ Invite an experienced facilitator to come to your group. They can highlight and deal with unhealthy group dynamics.

What to do when someone blocks?

Why do blocks occur?

In an ideal consensus process, a block wouldn't occur, since any major concerns about a proposal should have been noticed and dealt with before moving on to the decision stage. The fact that someone feels the need to block a proposal means that something has gone wrong earlier in the process, but because this will sometimes happen the option to block needs to be available.

Fundamentally, blocks occur when the conditions for consensus aren't being met. The kind of things that commonly go wrong, and end up with a block are:

- The proposal goes against the agreed aims and principles of the group.
- The proposal impacts in a profoundly negative way on an individual's fundamental needs.
- Going ahead with the proposal would lead to severe consequences for individual members or the group, e.g. members leaving the group, either immediately or in the longer run; or serious legal consequences.
- An individual hasn't been able to express their concerns in a way that the group can understand, or even at all.
- The group is not ready to make a decision – more in-depth discussion is needed to address everyone's concerns and to involve everyone in the decision making. There are many reasons for this, including: members of the group may be absent; not everyone had a chance to feed in their views; the proposal is being rushed through; people need to sleep on it; vital information is missing.

What to do in case of block

Once someone has blocked, it is important for the whole group to understand the reasons behind it. Find out whether an amendment to the original problem might be satisfactory to everyone, if not, go back to discussing other potential solutions to the issue.

It is also worth checking whether the block is actually a stand aside, as sometimes people aren't clear what the difference is – but remember to be careful to avoid putting pressure on the person blocking when checking this.

What if people are afraid to block?

Making use of the block can be hard, especially for people who don't feel confident in their group. It can involve standing up to perceived or actual group pressure and impatience. Many people are tempted to keep quiet and important discussions are sometimes avoided.

Create an atmosphere where people will feel able to block. This places particular responsibility on the facilitator to check what levels of agreement exist and to make people comfortable to speak up.

What if the block is being misused?

Because blocks are such powerful tools it's important to be aware of how they can be misused. Some of the common misuses are:

 conscious or subconscious use of the block to maintain or gain power or attention;
 different cultural and political backgrounds leading to misunderstanding of the block;
 the person blocking doesn't understand, or is not committed to consensus. For example blocking when the proposal is still being discussed – i.e. not at the decision stage yet. This could either be because someone doesn't understand the process or because they have already made up their mind and are not prepared to listen to other people's positions.

If you feel a block is being misused:

✓ Explain the consensus process and how the block works. Do this at the beginning of meet- ings, and possibly again if a block occurs.

✓ Discuss the difference between a block and a stand aside. It may become clear that an objec- tion is a stand aside rather than block. Be careful that the person blocking doesn't feel under pressure to stand aside.

✓ If someone regularly blocks it may indicate that the group isn't meeting their needs – perhaps they don't feel listened to? Try to uncover such hidden dynamics and deal with them.

✓ If someone finds themselves continually at odds with the rest of the group it may be time to consider whether this is the right group for that person. Does the person agree with everyone else about the aims and principles of the group? Would it be better for the person to leave?

What if people refuse to accept the validity of a block?

In some cases the rest of the group is unwilling to respect a block. This is a difficult situation. A group should respect a block, unless it stems from a fundamental disagreement with the aims of the group or is driven by abuse of power (although it isn't always easy to tell if this is the case.)

Some people argue that you should only be allowed to block a proposal if it is against the well-being of the group, however we feel it is valid to block for personal reasons. We need to respect each other even if we disagree profoundly – we can't just draw an arbitrary line to stop respecting people when it's about their personal view rather than the group's interest. Commitment to consensus means carrying on looking for solutions for everyone, even when it becomes difficult.

If a group goes against a block this can completely undermine the member's commitment to the group and is against the principles of consensus. The fact that someone feels the need to block suggests that their concerns have not been taken into account. If that block is then not accepted by the group, this might be an even more serious sign that they are not being respected. This means that the conditions for consensus are not being met, and this needs to be addressed.

In the short term there are a few things you can do if a block is not being accepted:

✓ Have a break for 10 minutes or even a few days – it allows people to cool down and have a think. Quite often the group will feel differ- ently after a bit of time out.

✓ Go back to exploring people's needs and concerns. Make sure that the member using the block is able to articulate themselves clearly, and the group can understand their concerns.

✓ **Ultimately if a group refuses to respect someone's block, then this may lead to that person leaving. It is important to remind everyone of that consequence.**

Steamroller proposals

Sometimes people already have firm ideas or proposals when they come to a meeting. This could be from a working group (such as funding or publicity), a local group or an individual who has already spent some time thinking about the issue. Bringing proposals to a meeting can be helpful in speeding up the discussions. However there is a danger that the proposal will be pushed through without discussion or modification. Also, people at the meeting often react negatively to a proposal because they have not had time to consider the matter for themselves and feel 'steamrollered', even if that was not the intention of the proposer.

To avoid these problems it's important to remind everyone that consensus is based on taking everyone's point of view into account, exploring different options and combining the best elements into a proposal. People bringing ideas to the meeting need to be willing to let the group modify and adjust them, maybe even beyond recognition.

Dealing with pre-existing proposals

Option 1:

After explaining the issue to be discussed collect any existing proposals and put them to one side.

Together explore the issue, gather concerns and look for any other new ideas.

Add new ideas to your list. Have a broad ranging discussion about all ideas – the pre-existing ones and those that have come out of the meeting.

Synthesise a proposal for consensus out of these.

Option 2:

After explaining the issue to be discussed, outline the existing proposal.

Together explore the issue itself and the pros and cons of the proposal.

Make a list of people's concerns and other ideas.

Modify the proposal to address these until everyone is happy with it. (This only really works if there is just one existing proposal. If there are two or more, using this process would set up an either/or dynamic that might make it really hard to reach agreement).

Our group is biased towards the status quo

In consensus based groups there can be a resistance to change, with some people using the decision- making process to consistently stifle new initiatives and to maintain the current position.

Many people are afraid of change and can feel challenged by new people wanting to introduce new ways of doing things. It can be hard to overcome this, but consensus should not be used as to stifle innovation. Consensus can help in these situations by accommodating both the wish for change and the wish to protect that which is well-proved and working. If this is not achieved then ultimately people will get frustrated and leave the group. At the same time it is well worth taking into account people's experience – there may be very good reasons why they are opposing something.

Some ideas to try:

 A sub group could go ahead with a project without everyone being involved.

- A trial period for a new way of doing this, with built in review.
- Identify what it is that people are afraid of and find solutions.

For more briefings and training workshops see:
www.seedsforchange.org.uk