Why Use Consensus?

Consensus allows for qualitative (not quantitative) decision-making.
Consensus doesn't just weigh votes, yes/no, either/or, for/against. Instead, the process seeks to weigh the strength of individual opinions—allowing stronger opinions greater sway in the outcome of a decision, than indifferent or marginal opinions.

Consensus allows for better decisions.
The consensus process frequently forces groups to explore options which might otherwise be ignored. Concerns of a group or an individual must be addressed or a proposal will be blocked. Addressing these concerns, a group is forced to use creativity to seek out innovative approaches which will satisfy the concerns of all present.   Groups are committed to decisions.

Consensus decision-making is not a process of winners and losers.
There is no disaffected group with an interest in seeing a policy or an action fail. Instead, consensus signifies commitment from the entire group.   There are better group relations.

Consensus is based on the worth of the opinions and concerns of an individual or faction.
Conflicts are resolved through give and take, not by vote, and leave no minority to stew in its losses. Concerns are egalitarian.

Consensus empowers all individuals equally.
Good looks, the ability to make friends, the control over information…all are meaningless in the face of a single "no" from the group. Consensus forces groups to recognize the worth of each individual, not of factions and leaders of factions.

Okay, so now you think you're sold on consensus. You like the principles it's based on, you like the egalitarianism of it all, and you think it can strengthen the united sense of purpose in your group. You want to use it, and you plan to, but it's ten minutes before the meeting and you don't know how you're going to do it and you're freaking out and you don't know what to do (well first of all, you should have prepared…). Relax, because here we have the Seven Step Guide to Group Decision-Making!

STEP 1. *Describe the Issue or Problem Confronting the Group.*
The first step is to describe the issue or the problem that needs a decision or action by the group. The problem should by stated clearly and concisely. At times it is helpful to have the problem stated in writing so members of the group will have a clearer understanding of the issues confronting them. Reviewing the group's goals helps to keep the discussion centered on the overall mission of the group, thereby keeping the discussion relevant to the problem.

STEP 2. *Collect All Pertinent Information About the Problem.*
Decisions are arrived at much more readily when problems are clearly defined and well understood. Therefore, all pertinent facts and ideas about the problem should be presented. Furthermore, careful distinction should be made between facts and opinions. Many, perhaps most, decisions can be made right on the spot without additional information and often with very little discussion. However, if sufficient information is not readily available, it may be wise to defer action until the necessary data can be obtained.

STEP 3. *Make a List of all Possible Solutions or Courses of Action.*
The tendency for most groups is to center their attention on one or two of the first proposals mentioned rather than to explore all of the possibilities. As a result, much creativity is lost, and much time is spent debating the merits of inadequate solutions. A valuable approach is for the Chairperson to resist all attempts by the group to stop and discuss the advantages or disadvantages of any given proposal until the group has presented all of the possible alternatives. For complex problems, it is helpful if the suggestions can be recorded on a chalkboard or on newsprint so they can be seen by everyone and referred to later.

STEP 4. *Evaluate the Alternative Solutions and Set Priorities.*
Once the various alternatives have been listed, the group is now ready to go back over the list and modify, combine, or select out the best possible solutions. The most creative thinking of the group is directed toward formulating the best solution from all of the ideas that have been listed. Through a process of elimination, or possible combining or revising items on the list, a final proposal is formulated. The proposal is then examined carefully in terms of the results that can be expected and the consequences that may result if adopted. Needed modifications, if any, can be made at this time, This process usually generates much interest and participation from group members.

STEP 5. *Make a Decision.*
When the solution is finally designed, it is helpful to have it read to the group so everyone is clear on what is being proposed. A final touchup of the wording can be done at this time, if it is needed, so the proposal clearly conveys the wishes of the group. At this point, the decision can be formalized through an expression of consensus or by a vote on a motion. When the interests of the entire group are taken into account, there is seldom any opposition at this point. If there happens to be any opposition, this can be recorded if the group wishes.

STEP 6. *Implement the Decision.*
When a decision calls for action it is appropriate to spell out the tasks and responsibilities that need to be completed, indicate the steps that are to be taken, and determine when it is to be completed. Then proceed with the task.

STEP 7. *Evaluate the Results.*
In an on-going program, evaluate each step to see if changes need to be made in light of what has happened so far, so the program will be more effective in the future. At this stage, it is appropriate to compare what happened with that the group had anticipated would happen. In effect you ask the questions, "What would we do differently if we had it to do

again?"

The Role Of
The Facilitator In Consensus Decision-Making

Although all members of a group need to maintain their awareness of how the group is operating, it usually helps to have one person who is making that a specific concern. We are all familiar with the usual "leader" model for a group, whether chairperson, teacher, or president, but in consensus decision-making, the aim of the process is different, so the type of role needed is also different.

The facilitator, from the Latin "to make easier," is a guide who responds to the group's needs and desires, respects individuals and democratic process, and sensitively poses constructive questions rather than imposing answers and rules. The main functions of a facilitator are 1) to elicit from the group decisions on what to discuss and how to proceed, and then to serve to keep the group within that framework by objectively guiding the process, and 2) to determine the developing "sense" of the meeting on each issue discussed and to pose judgment on the group position.

The facilitator's tasks include:

- Being aware of the interactions among people.
- Helping others to be aware that the consensus process involves responding to ideas and combining the insights of others with one's own.
- Making sure that respect is maintained for each individual by allowing time for everyone to express her/himself.
- Pointing out any obstructions to the process, like excessive repetition of a point, interruptions, and trends of introducing new thoughts with no acknowledgment of a previously expressed idea.
- Expressing at appropriate points what s/he feels is a united judgment, and getting people to remove themselves somewhat to assess whether the expression of that judgment is a consensus.
- Perceiving times when no united judgment is being reached on an issue, and asking the group to consider whether to defer that question, eliciting a group decision on that matter.
- Beginning the meeting.
- Calling for introductions if appropriate.
- Calling for agenda items and writing them up on a large sheet of paper on the wall which everyone can see; calling for group help in assigning priorities to each item, and writing the priority numbers on the sheet.
- Asking the group to set a time limit for the meeting.
- If a controversy develops over following the "established" procedure or agenda, asking for group feeling on whether to "re-establish" it.
- Regulating the pace of meeting; if dragging, encouraging people to be more concise; if speeding, or angry, asking for short silence.
- Encouraging everyone to watch that their behavior contributes to the constructive conduct of the meeting.
- Leaving enough time at the end of the meeting for collective reflection, evaluation, criticism-self-criticism, and learning from experience, which are important to continued meeting improvement.