

USING CONSENSUS

The word consensus comes from the Latin “consentire”, meaning to feel with or perceive with. It is defined as “group solidarity in sentiment and belief”. Because so many people are pleased with the long-term results of consensus decisions, many groups are choosing to use consensus as their decision-making method.

Prior to using consensus, a group first must decide whether it will use “pure” consensus (with no alternative method for decision-making), or “modified” consensus (with a fallback method such as voting or executive decision). Both can work to help groups make important and effective decisions. What is critical is that the group is clear about which method it is using before it begins a decision-making process. If a fallback method is chosen, it is important to define precisely the circumstances under which the fallback method will be used. This might be: an agreed upon time limit is reached, the issue involves minor spending issues, a timely decision is critical for moving forward, or there is no possibility of a consensus due to policy views of the entities present, etc.

STRAW POLL CONSENSUS

One of the most trying aspects of consensus for some people is the tendency for groups to “talk an issue to death” as they struggle for unity of thought. The following straw poll system has been developed to help groups “see” where members stand in the course of a conversation. It is important that the straw poll not be used to circumvent discussion, but rather to aid and allow members to have a sense of whether or not discussion is important. No matter what the straw poll shows, it is always recommended that the group be asked whether or not there is a need for further comments or discussion.

How it works:

Members are asked to show the group where they are on an issue by raising one or more fingers, as follows:

“1” I can say an enthusiastic yes to the decision (or action).

“2” I find the decision acceptable and have no serious objections. Improvements could be made.

“3” I can live with the decision, but I’m not overly enthusiastic. It has strengths & weaknesses. The decision could benefit from more discussion or more work.

“4” I do not fully agree with the decision and need to register concern. However, I will not block the decision. More discussion is necessary for full support.

“5” I do not agree with the decision and will actively block its movement. More discussion is necessary or an alternative resolution is needed.

CAUTION: If one member shows a 3, 4 or 5, the group should make time to listen to and consider what the person has to say, if they want more discussion.