

Consensus-Based Decision Making

by Sophia Tutorial



WHAT'S COVERED

In this lesson, we'll discuss a particular variation on the conflict resolution process that can be used to reach a decision. The areas of focus include:

1. Consensus-based Decision Making
2. When to Use the Process
3. Scaling the Final Decision

1. Consensus-based Decision Making

When seeking complete buy-in on a decision, sometimes consensus-based decision making can be used to reach a general agreement.

Consensus-based decision making is a variation on the conflict resolution process that helps groups make a joint decision that will meet their mutual needs. This process is based on **consensus**, or a general agreement on the rightness of a course of action, a belief, or a decision. A consensus doesn't necessarily mean a unanimous agreement but rather a general one. The consensus-based decision model involves a process for seeking a general agreement on the right course of action.

The process needs to allow for responses that are a little more complex than a simple yes or no. Parties may have an enthusiastic agreement, moderate agreement, or extreme opposition. They also may simply need more information or answers to some questions and concerns.

There are a wide variety of responses that people can have to any particular action or proposal that's on the table, and the consensus-based decision-making process is based on collaboration or working jointly to solve a problem.



STEP BY STEP

1. *Discuss Options*

First, the parties involved come together to discuss the options for whatever it is they need to decide.

2. *Generate a Proposal*

Next, the parties generate a proposal for how to proceed based on the options they came up within the first

step.

3 Identify Concerns

The parties then make note of any concerns there might be from either side regarding that particular proposal.

4. Modify the Proposal

The parties revise the proposal to address the concerns identified in the third step.

5. Assess Support

Once the proposal is modified, the parties assess how much support each person in the room has for the proposal.

6. Finalize the Proposal

Lastly, the parties finalize the proposal they created. They will either move ahead with this decision or return to one of the earlier steps if there's not enough support.

Like conflict resolution, consensus-based decision making is an iterative process. There are times when it might be necessary to circle back to one of the earlier steps in order to have more discussion or identify additional concerns.



TERMS TO KNOW

Consensus-Based Decision Making

A form of decision making in which parties to the decision seek general agreement on the right course of action.

Consensus

A general agreement on the rightness of a belief, action, or decision.

2. When to Use the Process

Because the process is iterative, a disadvantage of using it may be the amount of time it can take; it may not fit in with the decision-making process of a particular organization. However, the advantage of this process is that it really creates buy-in via ownership, which is worth spending the time for if possible. This is especially true if the decision is high-stakes and has some longevity to it.



EXAMPLE Your organization is moving headquarters, or changing its name. Those are big decisions, and taking the time to get consensus and buy-in from the people who are involved makes sense.

However, if it's a smaller, more routine decision, such as figuring out how to staff the office over the holidays, it likely does not require consensus-based decision making.

When deciding when to use the process, it's also crucial to look at how many people the decision is going to

affect. Some decisions may affect just a few people, while others will really need stakeholder buy-in.

In certain situations, it may be important that the stakeholders feel a sense of empowerment because they will be involved in the implementation of the decision.

➦ **EXAMPLE** On a larger scale, certain policies or regulations involve parties like government officials, government agencies, businesses, and environmental agencies. Those parties are all stakeholders in whatever decision is made regarding the policy or regulation. In these cases, spending the time to achieve consensus and buy-in is extremely important.

3. Scaling the Final Decision

When making the final decision in a situation where the responses are more complex than yes or no, you can use a scale. This means that when you are voting, which can occur during the assessing support stage of the process, you can ask people if they fully agree, if they agree with reservations, or if they disagree. Sometimes people can disagree without wanting to prevent the decision from moving forward; they simply want their disagreement noted.

Other times, people may feel strongly enough that they want their disagreement to block the decision from proceeding without some more discussion or modifications. Some groups also allow members to abstain, adding an additional option.

Part of assessing support is deciding whether or not you need to circle back and discuss some more, identify additional concerns, or modify the proposal.

In terms of who has the final say in whether the decision moves forward, many groups have different rules. Some groups may consider 80% support a consensus; others may require a unanimous vote.

The group needs to decide what consensus means to that particular group, and then give the authority to whoever is facilitating the group to make the final decision.

Groups may vote anonymously, stand up and speak, or even use colored cards (e.g., red card for “I strongly disagree,” yellow card for “I have some cautions or concerns,” and green card for “I agree to move ahead”) in order to express their views.



BIG IDEA

There are a number of creative ways that you can assess support for a proposal, and the way you choose will depend on the dynamics of the parties involved.



SUMMARY

In this lesson, you learned that **consensus based-decision** making is a variation on the conflict resolution process that involves collaboration toward reaching a group consensus, or general agreement on an issue.

You now understand **when it's best to use consensus-based decision making**: when there are multiple parties, a need for stakeholder buy in, and a decision with long-term results. When you reach the final steps of the process, it's important to **scale the decision**, or allow a vote using answers more

complex than yes or no. There many ways of assessing support for a decision, and you can choose whichever best fits the needs of the particular group. Good luck!

Source: Adapted from Sophia tutorial by Marlene Johnson.



TERMS TO KNOW

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A form of decision making in which parties to the decision seek general agreement on the right course of action.